3
Gakuto Mikumo
ILLUSTRATION BY
Manyako
STRIKE THE BLOOD
THE AMPHISBAENA

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THE AMPHISBAENA

Gakuto Mikumo

Illustration by Manyako

Yukina Himeragi
Sword Shaman
The Lion King Agency's beautiful observer
Kojou Akatsuki
The Fourth Primogenitor
The world's mightiest, laziest vampire

Kanon Kanase
Faux-Angel
The kindhearted saint of middle school
La Folia Rihavein
Princess of Aldegia
Clever, wise, silver-haired crown princess

Sayaka Kirasaka
Shamanic War Dancer
Elegant dancer loaded up with magic bullets
Motoki Yaze
Hyper-Adapter
Cheerful classmate or two-faced jester?
Asagi Aiba
Cyber Empress
Gorgeous, selfish high school cyber genius

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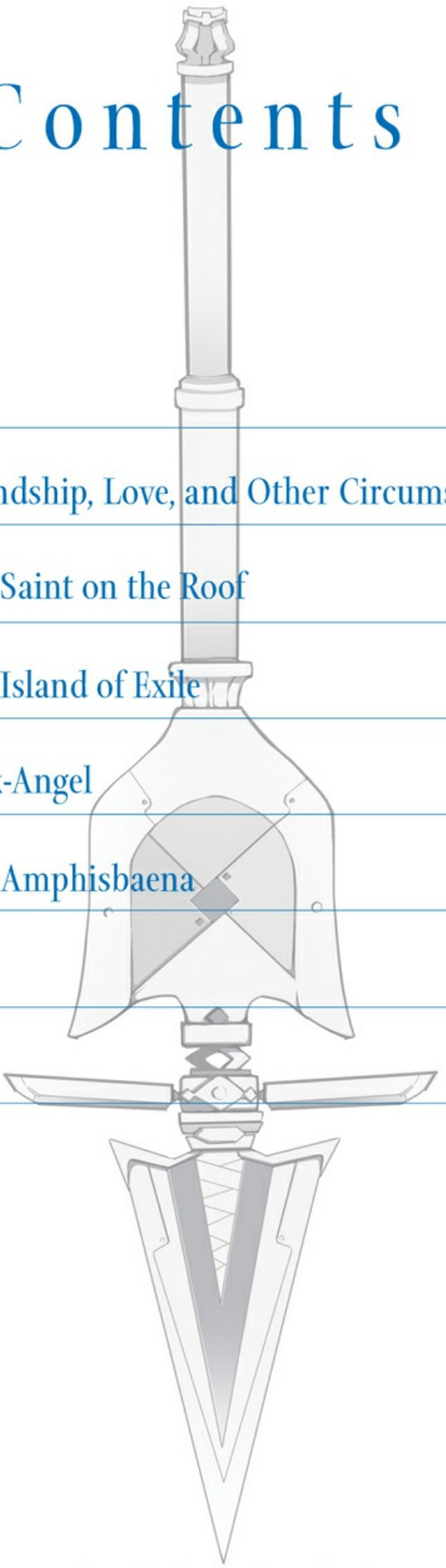

Design / Hirokazu Watanabe (2725, Inc.)

STRIKE THE BLOOD

THE AMPHISBAENA

3

GAKUTO MIKUMO

ILLUSTRATION BY
MANYAKO

YEN ON
NEW YORK

Intro

INTRO

The girl awakened within the light.

Pure white walls, dazzling lighting—even the air lacked a single particle of dust.

The electronic medical devices on the bed the girl lay upon watched silently, like wood carvings. A verse from ancient holy texts had been engraved into the marble floor.

This was both an isolation chamber for a special patient and a solemn, holy sanctuary.

"…Test subject XDA-7, consciousness level rising."

Somehow, it hurt to listen to the cold, inorganic voice coming from somewhere far off.

The gray manacles into which both her arms had been inserted made a faint but hard metallic creak.

"Blood pressure, heart rate both rising. Body temperature up point three degrees. Blood cortisol spiking. In accordance with standard rule 2,544, requesting hymn from protocol chapter six, verse one, to chapter nine, verse eleven."

"…Permission granted. Commence the hymn."

Majestic music poured down from above the anguished girl's head.

The stanzas of the countless melodies were repeated in canonical style. The reverberations of synthesized voices singing holy verse accompanied the sublime pipe organ. As if responding to the singing voices, the text carved into the floor glowed with greater intensity.

As an aura of serenity filled the room, the girl slowly stopped moving.

She was a silver-haired girl. It seemed certain that she had not yet reached the

age of fifteen.

Her body was clad only in a deep blue patient's gown and a metallic black mask. The mask bore countless eerie images of eyeballs.

Her bare arms and legs were pale and slender enough to look frail. Bizarre brands appeared on the surface of that white skin. They looked like interconnecting electrical pathways: an elaborate magical formula.

The brands flickered in tune with the synthetic chorus that poured down from above.

"Continue the chant. Administer painkillers and tranquilizers in parallel and resume subliminal suggestions."

The girl heard the indifferent back-and-forth between the sorcerous engineers while in a light sleep.

She no longer felt pain or sadness. A beautiful light and a flood of sound enveloped her.

The divine pulses created by the sorcerous runes would eventually alter her very nature, shifting her to a higher, more spiritual existence: a being of grace and purity near that of the omniscient God that ruled heaven itself.

Right now, she was not human; she was a servant of God blessed through the power of sorcery.

Then why…? wondered the girl.

Why is there an aftertaste of fresh blood on my tongue…?

Flames enveloped the entirety of the ship as it cruised through the sky at an altitude of a thousand meters.

The ship was over 170 meters long. It was a giant armored airship covered in a shell formed of a special alloy, outfitted with four turboprop engines and twelve machine-gun turrets.

Upon its stabilizer wings, the image of a Valkyrie bearing a sword was emblazoned—the symbol of the royal family of the Northern European kingdom of Aldegia.

The spindle-shaped hull was painted pale blue like a glimmering glacier with golden ornamentation at its edges. This was a flying fortress exclusive to the royal family and the loyal knights that served it.

But at that moment, the beautiful ship looked pitiful, bearing countless wounds.

"*Whew…* What a pain."

The tall woman stood atop the deck of the burning ship. Her entire figure was clad in a red bodysuit. Her right hand gripped a long spear.

And her charming eyes were dyed scarlet, as if dripping with blood.

The white fangs that poked out of the gap between her lips revealed her true nature. She was a full D-type—a vampire.

"Sheesh. You're making me work here. This is really getting on my nerves…"

The woman walked upon the deck, dragging the spear in her wake.

The tip of the crimson spear scraped the ship's armor, scattering sparks about with a shrill sound.

She was the one assaulting the ship—the one responsible for mercilessly destroying the splendid vessel's hull and enveloping it in a vortex of flames.

"…Who…are you? Who hired you?"

Standing before her was a knight, his body clad in augmented armor trimmed with gold. His epaulets bore the crest of Aldegia.

They marked him as a member of the Royal Bodyguard and the commander of the flying airship's military escort.

"You struck knowing the *Ragnvald* is protected by we Knights of the Second Coming?!"

Though he bore wounds over his entire body, the knight glared ferociously at the woman. The sword he wielded emitted a pale light.

The vampire woman listlessly stopped in place, giving the knight before her a look of obvious scorn.

An explosion detonated behind her. One of the gas bladders that kept the hull

aloft had been destroyed. As the giant armored airship's hull lost precious buoyancy, it began tilting ominously.

The knight's shoulders shook with rage as he watched the golden ornaments of the ship fall away.

The woman flicked her long, waving hair in annoyance.

"I *told* you, didn't I? Just hand over the rotten little bitch you zealots are protecting already. If you do that, *your* deaths will be quick and painless…!"

Before she finished speaking, her arm howled and roared as if ripping through the very air. The long, crimson spear released a surge of explosive magical energy as it assaulted the knight.

"Don't get carried away, vampire scum!"

The knight squarely withstood the blow.

The crimson spear was thrown back, a side effect of the incredible demonic energy. Watching this with no special sign of surprise, the woman sighed dejectedly.

"Huh…? That's Aldegia's Völundr System thing? It certainly is a bother. So lame…"

"Did you think you could bring this ship down, filthy jackal? You shall do as you please no further, demon!" The knight pointed the pale, shimmering tip of his sword at her.

The Völundr System was cutting-edge knight gear developed by the kingdom of Aldegia. The powerful tactical support system used spiritual energy transmitted by the reactor of the mother ship to turn a mundane weapon into a magical one, temporarily giving it the might of a Holy Sword–class weapon. Thanks to this system, the Aldegian Knights of the Second Coming had gained great fame on the battlefield. Some even called them the mortal enemy of demonkind.

However, even faced with the radiance of the pseudo–Holy Sword, the woman's expression did not falter. Still listlessly holding her spear, she shot the wounded knight a look of open ridicule.

That moment, a black silhouette appeared behind the woman's back. It was a

beast man with jet-black fur.

"…Sorry to keep ya waitin', BB!" the beast man called out to the woman in a sober tone. The scent of blood wafted up from his entire body: blood spatter from the crew of the airship he had attacked. There were still pieces of raw flesh stuck to the sharply tapered tips of his claws.

"Yes, welcome back. Where's the Aldegian sow?" the woman asked without looking. The beast man quietly shook his head.

"Not here. The bridge was empty, too. There's one lifepod missing. Looks like she got away."

"So this was all for nothing? Good grief. I wonder if they'll even pay us. Well, that's fine…," the woman said, openly disappointed. As the bloodlust on her beautiful, corrupt face vanished, the crimson spear evaporated from her hand as well. Her arrogant demeanor told the knight leveling his sword at her that his existence was insignificant to her.

"You dare mock me…?!" the knight howled, raising his pseudo–Holy Blade high.

The woman shot an annoyed look back at him and laughed derisively.

"I'll concede that the Völundr System packs a punch. Your run-of-the-mill demon couldn't even get close to that light, could they?"

As the knight yelled and unleashed his attack, the vampire woman evaded it with ease. Then, she operated a cell phone–sized device with practiced ease. The word *Advent* appeared on the device's screen.

A moment later, the sky above their heads was filled with light.

"But I'm *so* sorry…your opponent *isn't* a demon."

As if tearing apart the dark nighttime sky, something descended from a rip in a cloud. It was a small silhouette enveloped by a malevolent light. And a number of warped wings with red blood vessels running all over them sprung out of her back.

"What is that…?!"

The knight's sword lashed out toward the airborne silhouette.

The spiritual energy of the pseudo–Holy Blade became a ray of light that assailed the shadow. This was a spiritual, purging light able to repel any demon. But the instant the blade of light was about to make contact with the airborne silhouette, it smashed against something like a glass wall and winked out.

“That’s insane,” gaped the knight, as the red-clothed woman laughed with what almost seemed like pity.

The airborne silhouette descended at high speed, drawing near to the damaged airship. The pulses of magical energy it scattered about became a raging gale that shook the ship’s hull.

The knight unleashed another slashing attack. But no matter how many times he did, the result was always the same.

The spiritual light of the pseudo–Holy Blade could not touch the hovering silhouette. It was as if the sun itself was mocking the light given off by this pale, man-made imitation…

This was a power that could nullify the purging effect of spiritual light. In other words, it demonstrated that the silhouette hovering before his eyes was not an evil being. This malevolent monster was an existence far holier than that of the man-made, pseudo–Holy Blade fueled by a spiritual reactor.

“This…can’t be an…”

Only then, when the monster landed on the flying ship’s deck, was its form fully exposed to him.

Its bare arms and legs bore eerie runes. Its wings looked as if they’d been sprayed with acid. A bizarre mask covered its head. But even so, its aura was all too serene, even divine…

“An…gel…?!”

The winged monster raised a clear, singing voice as it released a dazzling beam. It was a purifying light that burned everything away.

The red-clothed woman and the beast man had already fled. Without even time to register this fact, the knight’s consciousness was enveloped in a burning light. The beautiful armored warship exploded and broke apart, its wreckage

falling into the dark nighttime sea.

Chapter One
Friendship, Love, and Other Circumstances

CHAPTER ONE

FRIENDSHIP, LOVE, AND OTHER CIRCUMSTANCES

1

It was not actually the first meeting between the two of them.

However, the first memory she—Asagi Aiba—had of Kojou Akatsuki was that night at the dimly lit waiting room in the hospital.

That night, Asagi was sitting on a bench all by herself, gazing absentmindedly at the laptop open on her lap. She was wearing a Saikai Academy middle schooler uniform, with plain, black hair.

It was sometime after nine PM. There were no longer any outside guests visiting patients. It was dark outside the window; the hospital was quiet. The still-young girl was illuminated only by dim emergency lights.

Kojou, who just happened to be passing by, suddenly halted, his eyes glued to the side of her face.

Half of the reason was that he thought he'd seen the girl before.

The other half was that she looked like she was crying.

Noticing Kojou gazing at her like that, Asagi suddenly lifted up her face.

He hadn't expected her to glare straight at him with firm, tear-moistened eyes.

That surprised Kojou a little. When he'd seen Asagi Aiba in class, she seemed nothing more than a mature girl who didn't really stand out much. "You're…the newbie in my class at school, right?" Asagi asked in an unexpectedly peaceful tone.

Kojou made a short sigh. "At least call me a transfer student. It's been almost

two months since I transferred over."

"Oh… Well, not like it matters, anyway," Asagi shrugged indifferently. He didn't learn this until later, but apparently she'd lived on the small, artificial island known as Itogami Island from since she was kindergarten age. Certainly, Kojou's having come to the island less than two months before made him nothing more than a Johnny-come-lately from Asagi's perspective.

"What happened to your glasses?" Kojou asked, as he realized what was different from the way she normally looked in class. So far as Kojou could remember, Asagi was always wearing a pair of plain, unfashionable glasses.

But Asagi dismissively shook her head. "They're just for show. It's not like my eyes are bad."

"Is that so? Just seems…" *Like a waste of your good looks*, Kojou was about to say but thought better of it and swallowed his words; it wasn't any of his business.

Asagi shot him a suspicious glare, her eyes narrowed. "More to the point, what are you doing in a hospital at this hour? Sprained a finger?"

"…I wouldn't come to a huge hospital like this for a finger sprain, y'know." Kojou grimaced as he replied. Apparently Asagi knew that Kojou was a basketball player, at least. She made a somewhat mischievous smile, even with her eyes still red and puffy from crying.

"So what is it? Player on your team got life-threatening injuries?"

"Cut that out. Got nothing to do with that."

Kojou lowered his voice as his lips made a serious, disagreeable twist. He tried to convey things as casually and factually as he could, as if to not make things any graver than they were.

"My little sister's hospitalized… Been that way ever since we came to this island."

"Is…that so…?"

Asagi's expression didn't change. But he didn't think the faint wariness and hostility toward Kojou in her voice was just his imagination.

“Why are you standing up? Sit, would you?”

Folding the notebook computer on her lap, Asagi pointed to the seat right beside her.

“Er, but…”

“It’s fine. I’ll feel pathetic if I’m just sitting here crying all by myself.”

“My being here isn’t gonna help anything, y’know.”

She’s got another thing coming if she’s expecting me to console her, thought Kojou as he spoke, but Asagi leered at him.

Despite her obvious beauty, her smiling face was awfully plain and frank. “It’s fine. After all, if you tell anyone else, I’ll be the one making you cry.”

“The heck’s that? Aren’t you treating me a little rough here?”

“Put up with it. It’s your fault for seeing me cry in the first place.”

Her irrational declaration brought a strained smile to Kojou’s face. He was relieved that she didn’t seem at all concerned about the opposite sex. Her attitude was refreshing. He felt like he was dealing with a guy he’d known for years.

That memory was before the youth known as Kojou Akatsuki was to be called the Fourth Primogenitor, the World’s Mightiest Vampire…

2

—So that’s how it was.

Kojou gasped and lifted his face as the soft sensation of her lips and the teasing tone of her voice came rushing back to him.

He was in a packed monorail station. The unenthused train conductor spoke rapid-fire in a sleep-inducing tone. Outside the window were the man-made skyline of Itogami City and the morning sun shining upon the open, blue sea. These were the familiar sights of the Demon Sanctuary.

Feeling an itch in his nose like he was about to have a nosebleed, Kojou sighed.

A dream, huh?

“Senpai.”

“Whoa?!”

Kojou made a vivid yelp as Yukina Himeragi called out to him from point-blank range.

Yukina hmphed, her lips twisting in displeasure as she looked up at Kojou.

She was a middle school schoolgirl in uniform with a black guitar case on her back. She had a refreshing beauty to her, almost too nicely arranged. He ought to have been a little more used to seeing her, but when she suddenly popped into his vision looking like that, he got nervous for no good reason. However, she had not the slightest inkling of the effect she had.

Yukina spoke to the shaken Kojou in a blunt, dubious tone. “We’re going to arrive at the station shortly.”

Right on cue, the monorail was just beginning to decelerate before reaching the next station. This was the station closest to Saikai Academy, where Kojou and Yukina went to school. This was the normal time slot for the school commute, so there were a good many other students on the train at the same time as they were. Numerous jealous and hate-filled glares fell upon Kojou for being able to go to school with a girl as pretty as Yukina.

In reality, Yukina was simply performing her duty as watcher, but under the circumstances, no one would believe any such claim. Nor would they believe that the guitar case Yukina carried over her back contained a demon-slaying spear said to be able to kill even a Primogenitor.

Gimme a break here, Kojou murmured internally as he made a frail sigh. “R-right. Sorry. Dozed off a little there.”

“I can see that.”

“C-can you now.”

“…Is something on your mind? You seemed to be having a nightmare of some sort.”

Yukina had an overly serious expression as she inquired. Kojou’s expression

wavered once more. Of course, he didn't say something like, *Oh, I was remembering how I got kissed by my classmate.*

"N-nah, nothing like that at all. Just surprised me, that's all."

"…Did something happen with Aiba?"

"Eh?!"

How did you know? Kojou nearly said, furiously swallowing down the words. Yukina's spiritual sensitivity as a Sword Shaman was not to be underestimated.

As Yukina drew closer, staring intently at him, Kojou averted his gaze as a cold sweat came over him.

"N-no, of course not… Ah-ha-ha…"

"Really?"

"Nothing. Didn't do nothing."

"…Why are you looking away, senpai?"

"I-if you've really gotta ask, this angle is kinda…," Kojou mumbled hesitantly. Yukina was all but pressed up against him as she looked up.

"Angle?" Yukina blinked with a blank look.

She was a short girl; Kojou was nearly two hundred centimeters tall. From his vantage point, if he looked down at Yukina while she was at point-blank range, he had just the right angle to stare down at the bust of her uniform.

In other words, at the pale white skin visible through the gap in her collar and at the valley between those softly swelling peaks—

"Senpai…!"

With a sudden move, Yukina covered her bust with both hands and glared at Kojou.

Kojou desperately shook his head. "Wait, wait! It's not my fault!"

"…I suppose not. It is a relief you are being your normal self, senpai." Yukina sighed deeply as if surrendering.

Like your being relieved by that is a good thing, Kojou thought with a grimace

on his face. It was good that he'd managed to get off that topic for the moment, but for some reason, he didn't feel like the air had been cleared.

The automated monorail reached the station, and the doors opened. Kojou and Yukina mixed with the noisy flock of students getting off the train and made their way to the ticket gate.

It wasn't even a ten-minute walk from the station to Saikai Academy. Kojou listlessly walked along the undulating road. Glancing up to see the side of Kojou's face like that, Yukina's eyebrows frowned in apparent concern.

"Senpai, are you really all right? You don't look so good."

"Can't be helped, can it? It's seriously tough for someone with a vampire's constitution to come to school at this time of day." Kojou made a resentful expression as he looked up at the excessively bright blue sky.

This was Itogami Island, the artificial city of eternal summer floating in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Even in October, there was no sense of autumn whatsoever; powerful sunrays poured down, as was their wont. Truth be told, it was tough on everyone, not just vampires.

"Besides, I've been sleep deprived all the time lately."

"Sleep deprived?"

"Yeah, 'cause that Kirasaka girl's been calling me in the middle of the night."

"Calls? From Sayaka to you, senpai?"

Yukina's eyes were wide in apparent shock. Kojou didn't even notice.

"Yeah, she's been doing that from time to time lately. Like asking how you were that day, and after that, long lectures for who knows what. What the hell's she thinkin', calling me over little things like that?"

"Lengthy…and over…little things?"

"She said she's gotta talk to me because you don't have your own cell phone, y'see."

Without displaying any special suspicion, Kojou relayed the explanation exactly as it had been given to him.

For some reason, Yukina had a serious look on her face as she murmured to herself.

“…Sayaka’s hated phones since way back. It caused a bit of trouble at times. She’d even turn down calls from her Lion King Agency superiors, saying she couldn’t endure the voice of a man in her ear.”

“Oh yeah… She hates men, doesn’t she?” Kojou sighed as he remembered how prickly Sayaka’s attitude had been just after they’d met.

Sayaka Kirasaka was an Attack Mage affiliated with the Lion King Agency, just as Yukina was.

As a child, she’d been physically abused by her father routinely because of her excellent Spirit Sight power. Thanks to that, she held a grudge against all men, even now.

“I’ve gotta say, though, she really cares about you to be going out of her way to call me like this. Maybe you could call it concern for her friend, overprotectiveness maybe…”

“Senpai…”

Yukina turned a reproachful glare at Kojou as he murmured in apparent annoyance. Kojou was a little thrown off by her unexpected reaction.

“Himeragi?”

“No, it’s nothing at all. I suppose you’re right.” Yukina stopped walking as she replied flatly. She seemed to be pouting somehow, but Kojou had no idea why. Yukina kept a blank expression on her face as she robotically went through the motions. “Well then, I must excuse myself. I am going to the middle school campus, after all.”

“R-right.”

Kojou tilted his head slightly as he watched Yukina head off into the distance. With the guitar case over her small back, she soon vanished into a sea of similarly dressed schoolgirls.

“What the heck was that about?”

He stood in place as the dazzling morning rays of the sun poured down without

mercy. It seemed this would be another sweltering day.

3

Kojou heard a voice behind him as he changed into his indoor shoes at the entrance. “Mornin’, Kojou. Man, you’re looking worse than usual. You all right?”

The male student, with headphones hanging from his neck, waved at Kojou with a high-tension demeanor. It was his “bad” friend from his middle school days, Motoki Yaze. Kojou waved back as if barely bothering.

“Just short on sleep. Leave me alone.”

“Hmm… Short on sleep, you say?”

Hearing Kojou’s indifferent reply, it was Rin Tsukishima, passing by at that moment, who smiled and wedged herself into the conversation. She talked and acted cool, and her style was second to none, making her very popular with the boys; she was also the class representative for Kojou and Asagi’s high school class, 1-B.

“Is there something on your mind? You can speak to me about it, if you like.”

“No, it’s not like I’m…worrying about it…”

“Interpersonal relations, then?”

As she watched Kojou seemingly glossing things over with vague words, Rin made her declaration without any hint of hesitation. Kojou was rocked back on his heels by her confidence-filled words.

“The shape of your brows and the angle of your nostrils form a face gripped by concerns regarding interpersonal relations.”

“…I-is that so?” Kojou subconsciously touched the tip of his nose in bewilderment. He’d heard that Rin had a knack for divining by the facial features, but it wasn’t as if he lacked a reason why he’d be concerned about interpersonal relations.

In contrast to the unnerved Kojou, Rin spoke with a majestic tone.

“The cause of your anxiety is a person very close to you, yes? The coloring of

your spiritual aura suggests…trouble with the opposite sex?”

“H-how did you know?” Kojou spoke on reflex as he remembered about Asagi.

It had been over two weeks ago when she’d kissed Kojou. It was right after the conclusion of a certain terror incident.

Since coming to know Asagi in middle school, Kojou barely realized she was a member of the opposite sex, but naturally, he couldn’t say the same after something like *that* had happened. Even someone as dense as Kojou could not fail to realize at least the fact she was favorably disposed toward him.

He did not think of it as any kind of nuisance. Setting aside whether these were romantic feelings, if asked if he liked her or not, Kojou would say without hesitation that he liked her.

And that very fact was the reason Kojou was troubled by it.

After all, he had a great secret that he couldn’t tell her: the nonsensical, lethal secret that *he* was the World’s Mightiest Vampire…

He couldn’t embrace Asagi’s feelings for him while keeping a crucial fact like that hidden from her.

Having said that, pushing her away to protect that secret would hurt both her and him as a result. In the first place, could not merely being close to him put Asagi, unaware of the truth, in danger by itself…? When he began thinking about that, Kojou’s thoughts became a quagmire without escape, leaving him completely at a loss. Sayaka’s phone calls weren’t the only reason he wasn’t getting enough sleep.

“Kojou… I’m surprised that you’re the type who falls for swindlers and con artists so easily.”

“C-con artists?”

Kojou stared at Rin in shock as giggles trickled into the air all around them.

Upon seeing this, Kojou finally understood. Rin had completely taken him for a ride.

Now that he thought about it, Rin was always close at hand; all she needed to figure out what was bothering Kojou was a little simple observation. She didn’t

need to rely on telling fortunes at all. Perhaps she'd figured out that Asagi was the cause of Kojou's troubles before she'd even started.

"Shit… You totally fooled me. I'm never gonna trust you guys again. Ever!"

"'Fooled' makes it sound so underhanded. I was trying to have a serious conversation," Rin replied with a serious look.

Kojou exhaled roughly. "I'll pass. I knew from the start that I gotta do what I gotta do."

"Hmm… Well, if you say so."

Rin smiled charmingly as she stared at the disgusted look on Kojou's face from the side.

Kojou and the others, still standing around, turned toward the classroom. It was still a little before the start of classes; about half of the students were already inside. Among them was a schoolgirl with showy, highly conspicuous looks…

Asagi Aiba noticed Kojou and the others and raised a hand.

"Morning, Rin. You guys, too."

Kojou listlessly returned the greeting, but he was quietly relieved that Asagi was her normal, everyday self. Even after what had happened in the hospital room, her attitude toward him hadn't changed whatsoever. Kojou was honestly grateful for it, even as he found it a little eerie.

But Rin, her sharp eyes detecting a subtle change in Asagi, raised an eyebrow, obviously intrigued.

"What's wrong, you're short on sleep, too, Asagi?"

As Rin pointed it out, an expression came over Asagi like that of a child being teased. She was covering it up very well with makeup, but when Kojou looked more closely, there were faint shadows all around her eyes.

"Mm… Yesterday was a bit… Er, what, Kojou? What's with that horrid look?"

Asagi, her eyes narrowed and sleepy looking, looked skeptically up at Kojou. Rin seemed amused as she looked between Asagi and Kojou, studying their

expressions.

“Akatsuki says he didn’t get much sleep, either.”

“Wh-what are you grinning like that for…?” Asagi lodged an objection in a shrill voice. Her cheeks reddened as she grasped what Rin’s words were suggesting. The redness remained as she glared sharply at Kojou.

“And could you please stop inviting misunderstandings like that?”

“What are you complaining to me for…?”

Asagi machine-gunned the excuse. “Anyway, the reason I couldn’t sleep last night was because of that ruckus.”

Listening to her, Yaze murmured as he bit. “I see. Right, that stuff was near your place.”

“That’s right. There were fire engines going all around till almost dawn. Was really noisy…”

“…There was a ruckus yesterday?” Kojou asked as the subject tugged at a vague memory. Asagi’s residence was in a pricey residential district near the center of the city. He thought it was a sleepy district free of late-night disturbances.

“Mm… I saw something about it on the news, about rampaging demons in West in the dead of night? Unregistered demons going at it or something.”

“Demons running amok?”

Kojou’s expression froze at Yaze’s amused explanation.

Asagi listlessly put her head on her hands and nodded.

“Looks like they made a real mess of things. A bunch of buildings came crashing down, some roads got blocked off, the Island Guard deployed to suppress it… It’s a big uproar. I thought for sure some idiot vampire let some Beast Vassal run amok again, but…”

“It wasn’t me, I didn’t do anything.”

Asagi looked up with an exasperated expression as Kojou’s mouth ran ahead of his conscious thoughts.

“Well, I know that already. What are you talking about?”

“R-right. Of course,” Kojou said in a frail voice as he wiped the sweat off his brow. Itogami City was a Demon Sanctuary. About 40 percent of its 560,000-odd citizens were inhuman demons granted formal residency. They included beast men, fey, half fey, half demons, artificial life-forms…and vampires. In this city, demons were more likely to run amok than outsiders of some sort.

That was why, even if a demon other than Kojou went wild and wrecked the city, it wouldn’t really be anything shocking.

As soon as Yaze and Rin turned to take their own seats, Asagi tugged on the collar of Kojou’s uniform and spoke in a small voice. “Incidentally, Kojou…do you have any plans after classes today?” For some reason, her question sounded bashful, driving Kojou’s tension way up.

“No. No special plans…”

Kojou made an awkward shake of his head. He expected that Yukina would be sticking to him in the course of her watcher duties that day, like every day, but he couldn’t call that *plans*.

Asagi made what seemed like a small sigh of relief.

“All right, come with me to the art classroom after class. *Alone.*”

“Art classroom? I mean that’s fine, but why…?”

Even while managing to keep his face composed, Kojou was completely beside himself. The Saikai Academy art club was currently on hiatus due to insufficient members. In other words, there’d be no one in the art classroom after classes at all. What in the world did she intend to do, leading Kojou to a place like that…?

“Just come. And keep it a secret from everyone else,” Asagi whispered, her cheeks red, ignorant of Kojou’s mental anguish. Unable to hold out against that face, Kojou put some distance between them as if making a tactical retreat.

4

And after classes that very day…

Asagi had left class first to wait for Kojou in the empty art classroom. The thin rays of the setting sun passed through the curtains to illuminate her from behind as the blowing ocean breeze made her hair sway.

Asagi had a pure white sketchbook right before her eyes. Her right hand was holding a heavily sharpened pencil for sketching.

"…A portrait?"

Kojou asked while giving her a look of disbelief. She was wearing an apron over her school uniform.

Asagi pointed to a calendar standing in the corner of the art classroom.

"That's right. It's a portrait or, you know, a likeness of a friend. I'm supposed to submit it by this coming Monday."

"…Didn't we do this in class last week?" Kojou asked back with a languid look on his face. Called out to a classroom with no other sign of human life like this, Kojou had intended to come prepared for anything. For example, a heartfelt confession or a demand to continue here where they'd left off in the hospital room…

But Asagi had her usual composed smile on her face. "Right, but I wasn't in class that day. The police called me over that day to give a witness statement. You know, about when that terrorist group kidnapped me."

"So you want me to…model for you?"

His strength deserting him, Kojou sat in the chair that had been prepared for him.

"Why not? You have the time and all."

"Well, I'm fine with it, but if you're gonna sketch, wouldn't someone like Tsukishima make for better material?"

"Rin has committee work today. And that idiot Motoki is on a date."

"…I see… Guess I've gotta do it," Kojou muttered powerlessly as if resigning himself to the inevitable. From a logical standpoint, Asagi's request was not unreasonable whatsoever. Kojou had simply let his imagination run wild.

“Right, right. So that’s how it is. Now, would you mind stripping?” Gazing with satisfaction at Kojou’s cooperativeness, Asagi spoke with an offhand, casual tone.

“Huh? Strip what off?”

“You’re a model, so of course I mean stripping off your clothes. Don’t tell me you’re embarrassed by something?”

“Wait, wait! Why do I have to strip off my clothes to model for a likeness?!”

“It’s for art, so deal with it. Then, I want you to make the same pose as this.”

With a grin all over her face, Asagi pointed to a corner of the art classroom decorated with a replica statue of *David*. The original was a masterpiece from the Renaissance painted by no less than Michelangelo. But…

“He’s buck naked!!” Kojou yelled at the entirely too aesthetic figure.

Asagi grinned and cackled. “I’m kidding, it’s a joke. All you need to do is take that smelly parka off.”

“Could’ve just said so. And don’t call my parka smelly.”

With a low groan, Kojou stripped off the parka he wore over his upper body school uniform.

This time, Asagi stopped fooling around, too, and sat squarely in front of Kojou as she opened up the sketchbook. Of course, this put their faces directly opposite each other, but Asagi made no sign of noticing.

Watching her hum through her nose as she made the pencil run about, Kojou was suddenly struck by a sense of guilt.

Asagi didn’t know he was a vampire. She didn’t know because he was hiding it from her.

Kojou asked himself: *Doesn’t this mean I’m deceiving her?*

He didn’t have to think about it; the answer was yes. Asagi had her guard completely down in front of Kojou because she trusted him. And yet, even now, he was betraying that trust.

He thought of Asagi as a precious friend.

Therefore, this was not a betrayal that was forgivable. Kojou only realized that himself then and there. No, he understood it from the beginning. If Asagi was truly drawing near to him with affection, Kojou *had* to tell her the truth: the crazy truth that he was the vampire known as “the Fourth Primogenitor.” Even if that meant losing both her affection and her friendship in the process…

That very moment, just as Kojou was quietly hardening his pathetic resolve…

“Mmm, this is boring.”

Asagi tossed the sketchbook away as she suddenly rose from her seat.

Kojou was thoroughly stricken by shock at her completely unexpected behavior.

“Wh-what is?”

“My creative juices just aren’t flowing here. I mean, you’re really ordinary. Can’t you make a funnier face?”

“…Why does the model have to entertain the person doing the drawing? I’m not into leaving behind a portrait of me making some kind of weird face…”

Of course, Kojou rebutted Asagi’s arbitrary demand. Asagi completely and utterly ignored him, slowly reaching a hand out to Kojou’s face.

“Oh, don’t say that, give it a try. It might be a lot more fun than you think.”

“I-idiot! Hey, cut that out! And where did you get that tape from?!”

Asagi deftly made liberal use of vinyl tape, toying as she pleased with Kojou as he resisted in vain. The reason he couldn’t simply force her off him was his hesitation about touching Asagi’s body with his hands.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Yes, that expression. That will do. Even you look good like this, Kojou. I feel a Picasso-grade masterpiece coming on.”

“Doesn’t feel like I’m being complimented at all here! It’s not like you’re gonna do a Picasso by having me model a weird face in the first pl… Uh, the heck is that?!”

“…Hm? It’s makeup.”

“That’s a paint marker!!”

Kojou's voice went coarse as he felt it make firm contact with his cheek. Asagi drew a vertical line on Kojou's cheek with a practiced hand.

"It suits you quite well. Gives off a nice punk aesthetic."

"This isn't 'punk,' it's some corny fake, foreign makeup job…! You're washing off this marker stuff properly afterward, right?!"

"Don't sweat the small stuff."

"This ain't small," Kojou said weakly in reply. Truth be told, it wasn't that he hated this; when he saw Asagi laughing, all his worries seemed like ridiculous, little things. He suddenly thought, *Maybe Asagi's pulling all these pranks with that in mind.*

"Ah, that's right… Hold on a sec."

Suddenly, Asagi left those words behind as she went out of the art classroom on her own. Kojou watched her go with unease. If it wasn't for the doodling on his cheek, Kojou would have gone right out after her.

Finally, Asagi returned to the art classroom, dragging several large rectangular cardboard boxes in with her.

"Sorry for the wait!"

"…The heck's all that?"

"Costumes. The drama club's classroom is close by, so I borrowed a few things. A lot of my girl classmates are in that club, see."

This said, Asagi opened the cardboard boxes. The costumes within were modern-era style and thoroughly outlandish. They included butler outfits, maid outfits, gothic lolita magical girl outfits, live-action superhero tights, *etc.* They seemed less like resources for a drama club than the personal belongings of a cosplay *otaku*.

"…What am I supposed to do with this stuff?"

"You're supposed to wear it, of course. It'll go great with your makeup, don't you think?"

Her face extremely lively as she spoke, Asagi pulled up and showed off one of

the outfits. It was a clown outfit with a red-and-white stripe motif he'd seen on the front of burger shops.

"Like hell it will," Kojou said, raising a shout.

"Why do I have to cosplay to help you with your art homework?!"

"It's to solve my artistic dilemma. If you don't want me to draw a picture of you making a funny face, you should at least be willing to put an outfit on for me. Or would you rather strip?"

"Like hell I'm strippin'! In the first place, it's stupid for me to be the only one wearing something like that!"

"…What's that? If it's not just you, then it's all right?" Asagi asked her question with a suddenly serious look. As if taunting the silent Kojou, Asagi pointed at an outfit in one of the boxes.

"If that's so, I'll change my clothes to match yours. No complaints then, right?"

"Er, no, I think I still have some complaints regardless, but…"

"Yeah, yeah. If we're changing clothes, you turn thataway."

With Kojou's objection overruled, Asagi undid the necktie of her uniform. She proceeded to put her hand over the buttons of her top. Kojou hastily turned his back toward her.

In the quiet art classroom after school hours, the rustling sounds of Asagi changing clothes echoed all about. Kojou forced himself to make imaginary free throws inside his own mind in an effort to fend off the sounds that stimulated his baser instincts.

After several exceedingly long minutes, Asagi said, "It's all right now," giving his shoulder a pat. "Now you can't complain, can you?"

Kojou turned and looked; right before his eyes, Asagi was wearing a family restaurant waitress's uniform. The outfit served to exaggerate the swell of her breasts, with a frilly apron on top. It came with knee-high socks and an unnaturally short skirt. It wasn't that the outfit was especially exposing, but the unusual situation—a classmate wearing clothes like this on school grounds—

bewildered him.

“…Why a waitress outfit?”

“I thought you’d like it, Kojou. You’re always staring at the waitresses at family restaurants, after all.”

“I am not!”

“Now, now. I’ve given you quite a freebie, so it’s time you changed clothes, too. Here.”

“You’ve totally forgotten why we’re doing this in the first place, haven’t you? What happened to your artistic dilemma?”

Steadily complaining all the while, Kojou peered into the cardboard box. He pulled out the sanest outfit he could see, which turned out to be the butler outfit. Asagi regarded it with great interest before turning toward the wall. Kojou yielded to the inevitable and began to change. Fortunately, the size wasn’t a problem. Apparently the drama club outfits had been made to have a certain degree of flexibility.

“Yeah, this actually looks pretty good on you, Kojou.” Looking at Kojou after he’d changed, Asagi smiled with what looked like admiration.

“That doesn’t make me the slightest bit happy.”

Looking at his own reflection in the mirror, Kojou’s face scowled in irritation. The “butler” clothes were black with a tailcoat. Whether Kojou liked it or not, he looked like a classical vampire. He was the spitting image of the terrifying demons that had terrorized mankind in the great war before the Holy Ground Treaty was signed.

Even as this fact made Kojou distinctly uncomfortable, he muttered, “There, happy now?” as he checked with Asagi.

…Click!

His eyes met Asagi’s as her stupidly high-end smartphone took a picture of him.

“Wh-what are you taking a picture for?!”

“Mm? Reference photo for my sketch.”

“Stop, delete that. Delete it right now!” Kojou shouted in a shrill voice. Here he was, after classes had ended, wearing a butler outfit, and *not* preparing for some kind of school festival. Plus, he had that weird “makeup” on his face; he thought it was a fairly painful situation to be in.

But for her part, Asagi filled the air with the sounds of her camera shutter on full rapid-fire.

“It’s all right. It’s not like I’m gonna send them all to everyone in class.”

“That’s exactly what I don’t trust you not to do! Aw, crap…!”

In a desperate counterattack, Kojou whipped out his own cell phone and photographed Asagi in her waitress outfit. Seeing that, Asagi let out a cute yelp. Apparently even she had some sense of shame.

“Hold on… Why do I have to get photographed too?! It’s indecent.”

“It’s not indecent. These are reasonable countermeasures!”

“Oh, good grief…!”

Asagi made a rough, seemingly defiant sigh. Suddenly, she stood right beside Kojou and wrapped herself around his arm. She proceeded to snuggle against him while getting both of them into the camera frame.

Click, the shutter reverberated. The two-shot was displayed on the smartphone’s screen: a butler and a waitress. It was a bizarre situation, but the image was picture-perfect.

“And? Got it out of your system?

“…Well, it’s not really a matter of getting it out of my system or not…,” Kojou said in a tired voice as he glared at the oddly satisfied Asagi.

Right after, a long chime rang throughout the school. The school day had come to an end.

Asagi scratched her head in disappointment as she gazed at the blank sketchbook. “It’s not finished at all. It’s all because you were dragging your feet.”

“This is my fault?! It’s ’cause you pulled out all that weird stuff!”

“This is bad… Mm, and I have something I need to do tomorrow,” Asagi

murmured, seriously conflicted for once. Of course, Kojou felt somewhat guilty, too.

After all, the whole reason Asagi had to do extra homework was because she'd gotten wrapped up in the terror incident; it was no fault of hers whatsoever. Besides, Kojou himself was hardly unrelated to that incident.

"…So how about we do it on the weekend?"

Kojou made the proposal, lacking other options. Either way, it wouldn't be easy to finish a likeness in just the time after class was dismissed. Besides, if the work was being done at Kojou's apartment, he wouldn't have to worry about dressing up in weird outfits.

"You're sure?"

"Yeah. My mom said she probably wasn't gonna be back for a while still, and Nagisa has club during the day, so there's no toes to worry about stepping on."

"…J-just the two of us, then…?" Asagi murmured in a voice so faint that it was hard to pick up. Kojou felt like he'd committed some kind of fatal mistake, but he couldn't just say, "Okay, forget it," at that point. "All right, sorry, but thanks. Saturday, okay?" Asagi said as she looked up at Kojou, a smile all over her face. And so it was.

5

Having returned the key to the art classroom and parted ways with Asagi, Kojou was standing in front of a washstand along the corridor. He was there to wash off the doodles Asagi had drawn on his face.

"Aww, crap… There, finally got it off…"

Having finished taking pains to wash the stubborn grime off his face, Kojou exhaled in relief.

As he stood like that, a towel was thrust in front of him. It was a clean-looking, pale blue towel.

"Here."

“Ahh, thanks.”

On reflex, Kojou responded to stimulus and wiped off his dripping wet face.

“…Wait, Himeragi?!”

Kojou froze in place when he realized who had handed him the towel.

Yukina, in her middle school uniform with her guitar case over her back, was standing right beside Kojou without letting her presence be felt. Kojou had absolutely no idea how long she’d been standing right there.

“What have you been doing at this late hour, senpai?” Yukina asked in a composed tone. She was in the shadow of a pillar, making her expression impossible to read. Yukina’s voice was gentle, but that only served to rattle Kojou all the more.

The root of Kojou’s defeat was that Asagi had so filled his head that he’d completely forgotten that Yukina existed. She, a self-styled watcher, i.e., a government-approved stalker, would of course have been monitoring his movements after class.

“Ah… Er, sorry, a classmate had me help her with some art homework until just earlier there.”

Kojou maintained a cool composure as he made an awkward laugh. Since he had no idea just how much of the situation Yukina grasped, making a clumsy apology would be a fatal mistake.

“It’s nothing you need to apologize for, although…”

Yukina let out a soft sigh as she accepted the towel back from Kojou.

“…did the homework you are referring to include having Aiba dress up in a waitress outfit and taking pictures of her?”

“So you *were* watching?!”

“I *am* your watcher, after all,” Yukina said as if stating the obvious. Her voice had its usual clear tone, but Kojou could not fail to pick up the echo of faint dissatisfaction in it. Although Yukina’s moods were difficult to read at a glance, Kojou had somewhat improved his grasp of them to a certain degree from having spent a lot of time with her over the last month.

“Then, you get it already. That was Asagi playing a prank; all she really asked me to do was model for a likeness.”

“…For a prank, you both seemed to be enjoying yourselves a great deal,” Yukina muttered with a sullen expression. Kojou was a bit thrown off at how she seemed faintly envious.

“Huh?”

“No, nothing at all.”

“R-right… Well, I’m kinda glad. Actually, I had something to talk to you about, Himeragi.”

Judging that Yukina had nominally accepted the situation, Kojou forced a change of subject. Yukina glared at Kojou with a guarded expression.

“Something to talk about, meaning Aiba?”

“Well… Well, it’s kind of about her and kind of about me.”

“Ah?”

“Err, I mean… I was thinking that I should tell Asagi, even if it’s just her, about what I am now…”

Yukina’s expression grew even sharper at Kojou’s vague outline.

“The fact that you…lust after Aiba?”

“…L-lust?”

Kojou looked back at Yukina, flabbergasted at hearing the unexpected word. Realizing she misunderstood, he hastily shook his head.

“No, not that. I’m not talking about wanting to suck Asagi’s blood or something…”

“What are you talking about, then?”

“I’m talking about telling Asagi that I’m really a vampire!”

“Ahh…”

Yukina’s strength seemed to leave her as she indicated she understood.

To her, Kojou had been the vampire she’d been watching since the moment

they'd met. At this point, even if he declared he was coming out of the closet, maybe it just didn't ring a bell with her.

Thanks to Yukina's odd reaction, Kojou felt embarrassed somehow as he continued.

"Going on deceiving Asagi like this feels a bit…embarrassing, rotten maybe?"

"Mm…" Yukina nodded vaguely. "It isn't that I don't understand how you feel, but why the sudden rush now?"

Of course, he did not give the honest reply—"because she kissed me"—and voiced a more legitimate excuse. "W-well… I mean, you know, it'd be bad if she got wrapped up in some danger she knows nothing about. Like the kind of thing that just happened recently."

"Ah, I see…"

"The thing is, even if I avoid her, that doesn't mean it isn't gonna happen, anyway." Kojou laughed a dry, self-deprecating laugh.

Not that vampires were any kind of rarity on Itogami Island, but your friend being an unregistered demon who'd been hiding it from you was a different story altogether. The chances of Asagi entering a wild rage weren't exactly low.

"It's just, if I expose what I am, that affects where you stand, too, Himeragi. So, I thought it was best to discuss it with you first."

With a meek expression, Kojou glanced to check Yukina's reaction. However, for some reason, Yukina looked like her mind was somewhere else as she nodded.

"I…see… Revealing to Aiba…a secret known only to me…"

"Eh?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing at all."

Yukina lifted her head and straightened her posture.

"There's no reason to be concerned for me. In the first place, I have nothing to hide in public."

"R-right."

Come to think of it, Yukina was a nationally accredited Attack Mage, and the organization she was assigned to was a publicly acknowledged government agency. It wasn't something to just wave around willy-nilly, but she wouldn't be inconvenienced if exposed. If anything, the reason for her to hide her identity was out of consideration for Kojou's position.

"The problem isn't me; it's Nagisa."

"Yeah…"

Kojou clutched his head as Yukina calmly pointed the fact out.

Kojou's little sister… Nagisa Akatsuki, was afraid of demons even though she lived in a Demon Sanctuary. She had an acute case of demon phobia. The cause was having been attacked by demons in the past, suffering grave, near-fatal wounds in the process.

That was why Kojou had to hide his true nature from her.

If Nagisa knew the truth, not only would Kojou and Nagisa be unable to live together as brother and sister anymore: worst case, it would inflict severe mental damage upon her.

If he exposed his secret to Asagi, that naturally increased the danger that it would reach Nagisa's ears. No doubt that's precisely what worried Yukina.

"Aww…crap, the hell should I do…?"

As Kojou exhaled weakly, he bent over a windowsill along the corridor.

He could see the middle school yard beneath his vantage point, illuminated by the setting sun. Kojou raised his eyebrows with a "hm" sound as, right in the shadow of a building of another campus, he spotted the sight of a familiar schoolgirl.

"Nagisa…?"

The small silhouette was clad in a middle school uniform. Her long hair was, typically for her, tied neatly back. Though not quite a case of "speak of the devil and he appears," there stood Kojou's little sister, the topic of their conversation.

And right beside her stood a boy wearing a sports club jersey.

The moment he beheld the scene, Kojou's mind went blank with anger and impatience.

"…Bastard!"

"Senpai?! W-wait, please! What do you think you're doing?!"

Yukina hastily pulled Kojou back before he leaped down from the window…on the building's fourth floor.

Kojou's face twitched as he looked back at Yukina, his feet still on the windowsill.

"Wh-what's with… Why is there a guy with Nagisa?!"

"…That's a boy from our class, isn't it?" Yukina answered the first of his questions with a composed tone. Yukina and Nagisa were middle school classmates; in other words, the schoolboy in the yard was from the same class as Nagisa.

"Come to mention it, I think I've seen him before… His name's Takashimizu or something."

Kojou muttered as he tracked down the vague memory. It was a face he'd seen many times on the grounds after classes when he was still in the basketball club. He was a soccer club member with tidy looks; Kojou recalled he was popular with the girls, too.

What the hell does a guy like that want with Nagisa? thought Kojou, losing his presence of mind.

"Ah…a letter."

"Wha—?!" Kojou's breath caught at Yukina's blunt murmur. When he looked, Takashimizu was indeed holding a sealed white letter in his hand.

"Wh-wh-what's some guy in the same class handing Nagisa a letter for in a place with no one else around?!"

"Not that it is my business…" Yukina slumped with a look of concern. She was apparently overwhelmed by Kojou's alarmingly threatening attitude. "But is it not proper to hand over that kind of letter in a place away from prying eyes?"

“What do you mean, ‘that kind of letter’…?!”

“Is that not a love letter?”

The instant he heard Yukina’s words, strength drained from Kojou’s entire body. A boy from the same class was handing Nagisa a love letter.

That’s crazy, there’s no way, Kojou told himself. Nagisa was still a child! It was practically yesterday she still had a knapsack on her back. She believed in Santa Claus until fifth grade, for God’s sake.

“Um, er… Senpai?” Yukina nervously called out to Kojou as he continued mumbling to himself like a madman.

A hollow smile came over Kojou’s face.

“Ha-ha, there’s no way. It’s Nagisa. No boy’s gonna give her a love letter.”

“No, er… Nagisa’s rather popular, actually.” Yukina revealed the unpalatable, shocking truth.

“Th-that’s just with dogs and cats and stuff…”

“That’s not what I mean. I mean with ordinary boys in class… I mean, she’s cheerful and cute, she’s easy to talk to, she’s very considerate, has a lot of friends… I don’t think there’s any reason she *wouldn’t* be popular.”

Kojou was only half-present as he listened to Yukina’s words.

Right about then, Takashimizu, having handed Nagisa the letter in the schoolyard, was walking away, full of himself at what he had accomplished.

“It appears that today, all she’s done is accept the letter.”

Yukina, who saw the immediate matter as closed, laid the situation out for the benefit of Kojou, who bent down in the corridor. Astounded at the sight of Kojou shaken like this, her voice was mixed with what seemed like a certain echo of disappointment in what she was seeing.

Chapter Two
The Saint on the Roof

CHAPTER TWO

THE SAINT ON THE ROOF

1

The seventh day of the lunar month, the night of the first quarter of the moon…

“H…hello?! Kojou Akatsuki?! It’s me!”

About an hour after midnight, the sudden ringing of the phone roused Kojou from the verge of falling asleep.

The voice he heard through the phone’s speaker sounded tight with tension. Kojou replied to the voice, one he’d become very accustomed to hearing over the last several days, with a reluctant tone.

“…Kirasaka? Sorry, I don’t feel like dealing with you today. Later.” With that, Kojou moved to hang up the phone.

“Huh?! W-wait, will you?!”

The girl on the other end of the line, Sayaka Kirasaka, sounded very rushed.

She was a War Dancer for the Lion King Agency—a specialist in curses and assassination. She was also Yukina’s former roommate. Kojou had come to know her due to an incident that had rocked Itogami Island two weeks prior.

A one-sided grudge by the man-hating Sayaka had caused a great deal of grief for Kojou, but for some reason, she kept in touch by phone like this even after she’d left Itogami Island once her mission had ended.

“What are you hanging up on your own like that for?! Inform me what the meaning of this is. Or does this mean you’ve done something to my Yukina

again…?!”

Her display of typical overprotectiveness toward Yukina put Kojou in a mood of deep regret. This was pretty much the only part of Sayaka’s personality he didn’t like, really…

“It’s not… Nothing to do with Himeragi, but I haven’t done anything to bother her. Probably not.”

“What in the…? I don’t understand a word you’re saying…”

Suppose that figures, Kojou thought with a bit of self-reflection.

“It’s not about her, it’s my little sister who’s in Himeragi’s class…”

“Ah, Nagisa you mean?”

“Why do *you* know about her?”

“She was in a file concerning the recent incident. Unlike you, she’s pretty cute,” Sayaka said glowingly in a self-absorbed voice.

“Oh, shut up,” Kojou muttered, grinding his teeth. “So…a boy in her class gave her what looked like a confession…”

“…Did you kill him?” Sayaka asked in a suddenly frigid tone.

Kojou was bewildered by the sudden change. “Huh?”

“Did you kill the filthy little thief? I mean, I do understand how you feel, but I wonder if burning him to a crisp with your Beast Vassal might be overdoing it just a little.”

“Like hell I did!!” Sayaka’s altogether too-extreme impression made Kojou feel a shiver as he shouted. “Why would I use a Beast Vassal to fry a guy making moves on my little sister anyway?! I don’t get what you’re going on about!”

“Why not? Maybe now you can sympathize a little with the anger and despair I felt when I’d heard you’d laid a hand on my Yukina.”

“No, no, no, Himeragi’s not your little sister, and anyway, I didn’t lay a hand on her.”

“…You drank my Yukina’s blood, you drank my Yukina’s blood…,” Sayaka repeated the words in a subdued, resentful tone. “Shut up,” muttered Kojou

again as he pulled the phone away from his ear. After a little while, he heard an “ahem” sound of her clearing her throat.

“Well, I basically understand the situation.”

“D-do you now.”

“You’re one of *those*. What do they call them? You’ve got a sister complex.”

“Er, no, you don’t understand one little bit. It’s not that at all,” Kojou disputed in irritation. “…It’s just, after our parents divorced there was no dad in the house, and Nagisa had a hard time for a while living in a hospital. That’s why I kinda feel like…if I don’t protect her, who will?”

“Is…is that so…? W-well, that’s pretty…commendable by your standards…”

Normally he’d never think about the matter that deeply, and more than half of it was born of the need to come up with an excuse at the moment, but Sayaka seemed to take it quite seriously. She murmured in a quivering voice before going silent.

Kojou felt a little guilty and changed the subject. “Anyway, what were you calling for tonight?”

“It’s not as if I have any business that has to do with you!”

Sayaka’s reply came in the blink of an eye. *What’s her problem?* thought Kojou, beside himself.

“Geez, don’t call, then!”

“Th-this week I’m going to Itogami City again, so I just wanted to tell you that if you ask, it’s okay to meet up somewhere.”

“…Did that idiot Vattler do something again?” Kojou asked with the sudden onset of a bad premonition. Dimitrie Vattler was an aristocrat of the Warlord’s Empire in Europe. He was a pureblood vampire of the bloodline of the First Primogenitor, the Lost Warlord.

He was militant to the point you could call him a combat maniac. Sayaka was his watcher.

But Sayaka made a weary sigh.

“Separate case. A…VIP from the kingdom of Aldegia is coming that day, so I’m supposed to be her…escort and guide…

“…There’s been a bit of trouble, though.”

“Aldegia? What’s someone that far from Itogami City want here?” Kojou asked back with a dubious voice.

The kingdom of Aldegia was a small European nation on the coast of the Baltic Sea. Known for its beautiful natural environment and high-tech industrial power, it was especially famous for production of magical products. But thanks to the great distances involved, it had no deep links to Japan.

“I…can’t really say I don’t know the details, but they’re diplomatic secrets, you see…”

“Ahh. Yeah, they would be…”

Based on Sayaka’s oddly reluctant tone, Kojou took her words at face value.

“Getting assigned escorting a VIP from another country, though, you’re really something, Sayaka. Even though you’re the same age as I am…”

“Er, ah…thank you…” As if stricken by surprise, Sayaka spoke in a rather cute voice. After that, she hastily returned to her usual overbearing tone. “W-well… naturally. I’m not a half-baked Primogenitor like you are. This is the least expected of Yukina’s older sister.”

Not like you actually are *Yukina’s older sister*, Kojou mentally interjected.

“If you’re escorting a big shot like that, you won’t have time to meet me or Himeragi, though. I’m sure it’ll be real busy. Figures it’s a totally different situation than us.”

“Er, yeah…” Upon hearing Kojou’s genuine words of praise, Sayaka murmured weakly, then groaned a low groan as if wanting to rebut him about something. “That’s right, that’s how it is! Go die, idiot!” she suddenly yelled defiantly and hung up.

What the heck did she really want, anyway…, pondered Kojou, staring at the silent cell phone in bewilderment. *Oh well*, he immediately decided and went back to sleep.

2

It was the next day after classes. Immediately after finishing his lessons, Kojou headed to the middle school section. He was, of course, heading there to keep an eye on Nagisa.

Being an artificial construct, Itogami Island had a chronic shortage of land, so the site of Saikai Academy was by no means excessively broad. Many facilities, like pools and gyms, were shared between the campuses. For that reason, Kojou encountered no special suspicion as he arrived at the middle school campus.

He'd already confirmed that Nagisa had been in a club meeting during that day's lunch break. Accordingly, if Takashimizu plotted to get close to her again, chances were good that he'd do it during the after-class period.

The problem was, how was he going to keep an eye on Nagisa without her noticing…?

"…What do you think you're doing here, senpai?"

Kojou, having infiltrated the campus building while avoiding prying eyes, froze in place as a sudden voice brought him to a halt.

With a gulp, he turned his head toward the speaker. Yukina stood there with a neutral expression as he met her eyes.

"Himeragi… Wh-what a coincidence. I was just passing through, y'see…"

"You were just *passing through* the middle school building?"

Yukina exhaled, exasperated. Perhaps he should have expected as much inside the school building, but the usual guitar case was not on her back.

"Nagisa went to the roof."

"…The roof?! Dammit, that's where…!"

Kojou clicked his tongue and looked above his head. Thanks to having seen her behind the building the day before, he'd been sure she'd show up somewhere near the same place again that day.

Now that Kojou was no longer making any effort to conceal that he was trying

to sneak in, Yukina shot a rather frigid glare at him.

“Senpai, you’ve got more of a sister compl— Er, you’re more of a worrier than I expected. I’ll put it that way.”

The typically considerate Yukina corrected herself before saying “sister complex.” Kojou twisted his lips in dissatisfaction.

“Just so you know, I worry about you, too, Himeragi…,” he informed her with the call from Sayaka the night before in mind. But even before Kojou got the last part out of his lips, Yukina’s cheeks were turning red.

“Wh…why would you be…? I’m here because of my duty, you know. There’s no reason for you to worry about me, senpai…”

For some reason, Yukina was lowering her face like she was blushing, mumbling in a small voice. Her rather mysterious reaction threw Kojou off a bit.

“…She only left the classroom just earlier, so I think we can still catch her. Let’s go.”

Yukina spoke decisively and walked in front of Kojou. Kojou was even more thrown off by Yukina’s sudden cooperativeness.

“Himeragi…?”

“I-I’m going with you. To watch you, of course, senpai.”

“R-right.”

Well, fine then, thought Kojou as he followed behind her.

Kojou felt a little nostalgic as they ran up the stairs, a different color than the ones in the high school building.

The door to the rooftop wasn’t locked. After confirming there was no sign of anyone in front of the door, Yukina gently pushed it open. That was when they heard a boy restraining an oddly sentimental voice.

“…Just cooperate already. You’re gonna make a scene…”

Kojou’s face paled at the fairly unmanly tone. Judging based on the fragments that his ears could pick up, he could only think that the boy was trying to convince someone to do something she didn’t want to.

“Wh-what are they doing, I wonder…?” Yukina murmured with apparent unease. Kojou’s expression remained frozen in place.

“Is that voice that Takashimizu guy?”

“…Yes. Probably.”

Yukina bit her lip and nodded. They couldn’t hear the words from whomever Takashimizu was speaking to. All they could hear was an occasional, delicate voice with something like a yelp mixed in.

Kojou swallowed his spit with a gulp and pressed his ear to the gap in the door.

“…Sheesh, I told you no. Don’t hug so tight.”

“Ahh, sorry… I’m not really used to this.”

“Hey, I told you that tickles…!”

“If you’re too loud, people are gonna notice…”

“I know, I know…but when I’m licked like that… O-ow…”

This time, Kojou could clearly hear the voice of a girl very familiar to him. There was no mistaking that it was Nagisa engaged in “pleasant conversation” with Takashimizu.

The instant he was sure of that, Kojou kicked the door open before his brain could catch up.

“S-senpai?!”

“You bastaaaaard!”

With Yukina still pulling on him to hold him back, Kojou leaped out onto the rooftop as he bellowed.

The shocked, wide-open eyes of Nagisa and Takashimizu turned to look at him.

“Okay, break it up!! Do you have any idea who you’re laying your paws on here?!”

“Eh…?! Um, uhh…”

“…Senpai, don’t! Calm down!”

Takashimizu retreated a step in apparent fear of the sight of Kojou’s rage.

Kojou brushed off the clinging Yukina and raised his fist at Takashimizu.

That was when a small, brown, furry animal leaped into Kojou's field of vision.

The round eyes of the kitten in Takashimizu's arms looked curiously back at Kojou. Kojou stopped in place as if those eyes had pierced him like an arrow.

The kitten mewed a small mew.

"H-huh?!"

With the eyes of everyone present upon him, Kojou slowly looked around the area.

He didn't understand what was going on in the slightest.

Takashimizu was standing there hugging a kitten. Nagisa was letting the kitten lick her own fingers.

Yukina was standing right behind Kojou, wide-eyed. The kitten made a meow once more.

And there was someone else…

There was a schoolgirl he'd never seen before standing right beside Nagisa.

Kojou's eyes were instantly taken in by her.

A gentle smile came over the girl's face; she seemed wholly out of place in this confusing situation, as if she'd wandered her way in from a completely different world.

Her silver hair evoked a snowy plain; her pale blue eyes glittered like a frozen stream.

Perhaps because of the color of her hair and eyes, she somehow felt like a beautiful lady of high breeding.

She was of small stature, not much different than Nagisa or Yukina. Even so, she seemed taller than they did, which was no doubt why she had a stylishness far removed from Japanese norms.

She was wearing a long-sleeved shirt under her short-sleeved uniform. It was strange to see anyone wearing one on Itogami Island with its year-round summer, but it matched her refreshing looks very nicely.

“Er… Who’s that…?” Kojou asked without thinking. “Meow,” went the kitten one more time.

The silver-haired girl said nothing, tilting her head as if a bit at a loss. The next moment…

“…Kojou!” Her hair standing up like a hissing wildcat’s fur, Nagisa stormed her way toward Kojou.

“N-Nagisa… What are you doing up here with a cat…?”

“What are *you* doing in the middle school building, Kojou?! Shouting nonsense all of a sudden like that! It’s rude to Takashimizu and it startled the cat. Plus, it’s making trouble for Yukina!”

Cold sweat poured down Kojou in the face of his little sister’s rapid verbal assault.

“Er… But what about the confession reply thing…?”

“Confession? What are you talking about…? I was just meeting with Takashimizu to ask him to take care of the kitten.”

As she spoke, Nagisa pointed to the kitten Takashimizu was cradling in his arms. “Meow,” went the kitten as if on cue. Kojou remained unable to pull himself out of befuddlement.

“…So what was yesterday’s letter about…?”

“Letter? Ah… Maybe you mean this?”

What Nagisa fished out of her uniform’s pocket was a drab, unembellished sheet of copy paper. What was written upon it was a long way from a confession of love; it was simply a list of residential addresses.

“A-addresses…?”

“—A list of athletics club members. Akatsu… Your little sister said that she was looking for people besides me who could take in cats, so I thought this might help.”

Takashimizu, having recovered from his initial surprise, explained to Kojou with a politeness befitting a proper athlete.

Nagisa lowered her head toward him out of apparent embarrassment.

“Thank you, Takashimizu. I’m sorry, my big brother had this strange misunderstanding…”

“No need to worry about that at all. Well, I’d better go.”

Making an eloquent smile, Takashimizu took the kitten back to the campus building in a cardboard box. Kojou watched him go.

“He seems like a pretty good guy.” He murmured his honest admiration, as if not involved in the matter at all. That moment…

“Senpai…”

“Kojou…”

Yukina and Nagisa looked up at Kojou, simultaneously sighing together.

As if her anger was not yet sated by this alone, Nagisa closed in on Kojou even more.

“I cannot believe this. How’s it even *possible* to mistake talking about getting someone to take in a stray cat for a confession?! Wait, even if it *was* a confession, what were you doing coming to peek on it, Kojou?!”

“…I’m sorry. I came right along with him.”

“You don’t need to apologize, Yukina. It’s Kojou’s fault for misunderstanding, anyway.”

As Yukina lowered her head, Nagisa covered for her while glaring at Kojou with puffed-up cheeks. *Well, that is exactly how it happened*, Kojou internally conceded.

“I’m in the wrong about coming to peek uninvited, fine, but you never said one word about trying to find someone to take in a stray cat!”

“Like I have to tell you. You and Yukina both live in the same apartment building I do, and we all know you’re not allowed to raise pets there.”

“Err.”

Kojou couldn’t come up with anything to refute the sound logic of Nagisa’s argument.

“…What’s with that cat, anyway? You been taking care of it?”

“It’s not me. Kanon’s been taking care of it.”

“Kanon… Meaning?” Kojou asked, as if doubting his ears at the name he’d never before heard. Then, the silver-haired girl who had remained silent to this point gently stepped in front of Kojou.

“Ah yes. That’s me, Kanon Kanase.”

Speaking with a soft voice, a gentle smile came over the girl. Her words sounded like those of an affectionate mother; the gentle look on her face seemed divine.

“I’m…very sorry. It’s really…all my fault.”

The girl’s silver hair swayed as she bowed deeply.

Watching the flow of her movements, Kojou was at a loss for words.

For some reason, Nagisa and Yukina both looked unhappy as they stared at the look on Kojou’s face.

3

“You’re Nagisa’s big brother, yes? I’m sorry to have caused you trouble.”

So spoke Kanon Kanase as she picked up the tote bag she’d left lying at her feet.

Inside the bag were milk bottles for cats, cat food, toys—an excessive amount of supplies for caring for a single kitten.

“Er, no, I don’t think there’s anything you need to apologize for, Kanase…”

As Kojou spoke with a fair bit of embarrassment, Kanon smiled pleasantly and shook her head.

“Nagisa has helped me a great deal when we were in the same class together until last year. Because I’m shy, and also, boys tend to avoid me, I don’t believe I’d have ever been able to hand the kitten over to Takashimizu if Nagisa hadn’t been here with me today.”

Kojou thought Kanon's words, which she seemed to believe in all earnestness, were a bit surprising.

She did seem difficult to approach in some ways, but Kanon was a more beautiful girl than most celebrities. He didn't think her reserved personality and gentle demeanor were reason enough for boys to consciously avoid her.

"What are you saying?" said Nagisa with an exasperated, strained smile. "I keep telling you, it's not that at all. Everyone clams up because they like you *too* much, Kanon. That's why they call you 'the Saint of Middle School.'"

"Huh…?"

Kanon blinked like she didn't really get it.

Kojou thought *saint* was an excellent way to describe the effect she had. In point of fact, the air Kanon gave off was a good deal more like a person of the cloth than a certain Lotharingian Armed Apostle. He could get people saying she was a nun in her day job.

"Himeragi, you know Kanase, too?"

Kojou quietly posed his question to Yukina.

Yukina whispered into Kojou's ear. "No. But I've heard the rumors often enough: that she has an exceptionally pretty face and is admired by all of the girls in her class. Also, they seem to levy a fine upon the boys of their class if they initiate conversation with her."

"I see. I don't really get that part, but it's quite something."

"Yes. But I understand why it's difficult to engage in casual conversation. She's too pretty."

"Hey, I don't want to hear that coming from you…!" Nagisa interjected, apparently unable to hold her tongue any further. "Just so you know, every last bit of that goes for you, too, Yukina. The boys in *our* class set up a three-second rule, a five-second rule, an eight-second rule, and a twenty-four-second rule for being under arm's length from you. They get a talking-to and harsh punishments if they go over those time limits. Oh, they're running put-a-curse-on-Kojou-Akatsuki sessions, too, so you'd better watch out, Kojou!"

“Why the heck are the guys in your class trying to put a curse on me…?”

Kojou felt a light headache coming on as he grumbled. Nagisa went “hmph” and seemed to pout as she turned away in a snub.

“Anyway, I need to go apologize to Takashimizu again. Kojou, Yukina, you help Kanon instead of me, all right?”

“R-right. I can do that much, sure.” Kojou nodded as he glanced at Kanon’s bag. Certainly, it was more than her slender arms should have been carrying. He had no objection to helping her.

“Sorry about this…” Kanon smiled bashfully as Kojou took the bag.

Now that the misunderstanding with Takashimizu was resolved, there was no reason to stay in the middle school building. Once Yukina made preparations to leave, Kojou hooked back up with her, with both then making their way out from school. But at around the point Nagisa split off from them midway, Kojou felt like he was being watched, making him utterly unable to relax.

Certainly, Kanon’s looks stood out a great deal, but Yukina’s looks were every bit as pretty. There was no way having *two* younger girls looking like that following in his footsteps would fail to attract attention. On top of that…

“…I sense a strange presence. Please stay close to me, both of you.”

Yukina was reacting to the bloodlust being trained upon Kojou, but as she said those words, she drew closer to him. That only created an even worse atmosphere, concentrating additional hatred from others upon Kojou.

Feeling like a criminal on a perp walk, Kojou quietly pulled up his parka’s hood and hid his face. By the time they finally safely escaped the middle school building, Kojou’s back was unpleasantly slick with sweat.

“I’m sorry… It’s all my fault.”

Kanon spoke apologetically as she toyed with her own hair with a fingertip. Apparently, she was under the impression that it was *just* her hair that made her stand out more than other people.

“So that hair’s your natural color?”

Kanon nodded a sad nod at Kojou’s casually posed question. “My biological

father is not Japanese. I was raised in Japan, so I have very little memory of him.”

“That so?”

Seeing that there were complicated circumstances involved, Kojou didn’t ask anything more.

Rather than head to the station, Kanon was making for the hill behind the school. Inside a small park filled with green trees, Kojou could see an abandoned gray building.

“…Is this a church?” Kojou asked as he looked up at the relief carved onto the building’s roof.

It was caduceus—the Messenger’s Staff—with two snakes entwined around it, a symbol not usually associated with the European Church.

“This is an abbey that took care of me when I was younger.”

Kanon looked at the decayed garden with a bit of longing. The flower bed was buried in weeds; there was a rusted-over tricycle left behind.

“Kanase, you’re not actually a nun, are you…?”

“No, I’m not. I looked up to them…but…”

Kanon quietly shook her head at Kojou’s question. Before Kojou could ask her to continue, Kanon extended a hand to the door of the building. She opened the damaged wooden door with a heavy creak of its hinge.

“Oh my…” As she peered into the decrepit building, Yukina let slip a little exclamation.

As she strongly looked over her shoulder, there was a glimmer of innocent emotion showing in her eyes that suited her age for once.

“…Himeragi?”

“Cats! They’re cats! Look, senpai, cats!!”

“R-right. I can see that…”

Kojou was a bit taken aback at Yukina being in such uncharacteristically high spirits. A seemingly countless number of golden eyes emerged from the dimly lit interior of the abandoned, ruined abbey.

There were ten-odd cats, still quite young, rushing toward Kojou and the others like bird chicks greeting the return of their mother. Kojou thought the sight was less adorable than frightening, but…

“Waah… So cuuute… There, there… There, there…”

Yukina smiled happily as she picked one kitten up after another. *Ah, come to think of it*, recalled Kojou, she was into collecting cat mascots. Yukina had been cool and composed on the roof with Takashimizu, but she’d probably been fighting her desire to pamper the kitten the entire time.

“So, umm, you take care of…all of these?” Kojou asked Kanon as the horde of kittens milled around his feet.

In spite of all these kittens living under one roof, there was no hint of any unpleasant smell in the abbey, a clear sign someone had been frequently passing through and caring for the kittens as well as cleaning up the place.

Kanon nodded as she prepared the cat food with a practiced hand.

“They’re all…abandoned cats, you see. I meant to take care of them until I could find people to take them, but…”

“Until you can find someone to take ’em? The odds aren’t good with this many…” Kojou was a bit beside himself as he spoke. Kanon lowered her eyes in dismay.

“Yes. I cannot do it myself. That was why I asked Nagisa and others to help me…”

“…So when Nagisa told me to help you, this is what she meant, huh?”

Kojou sighed and slumped his shoulders wearily as he finally figured out what his sister really intended.

Looking up and seeing Kojou like that, Kanon asked a tentative question. “I’m very sorry. Is it too much trouble?”

“Nah,” Kojou muttered with a smile, shaking his head. “I can’t just say I don’t wanna do it after what happened earlier. Then, there’s Himeragi there…”

“I’m so glad. I was a little worried. I’m not confident I can keep caring for all these little ones,” Kanon murmured as her pale eyes narrowed softly, giving the kittens a very fond look.

Gazing at the side of her face, Kojou was a bit dazzled by the saintly air she gave off.

“Kanase, I think you really would make a great nun.”

Kanon looked up in surprise as Kojou gave her his honest opinion.

For a moment, her expression held a faint trace of sadness.

“Thank you very much. Those words alone are…enough for me.”

Kanon made a soft, charming smile as she spoke.

4

The elevator continued downward until finally halting without a sound.

It was sixty levels belowground. This was the Gigafloat Management Corporation Public Security Department in Keystone Gate, the central core of Itogami Island.

She awaited the opening of the elevator door before marching into the dimly lit corridor.

She was a small woman wearing a frilly gothic lolita outfit.

Her cherubic face was better described as that of a beautiful girl's rather than a young woman's, if not that of a child's. In spite of this, her steps seemed mysteriously full of might as she marched without hesitation down the corridor.

"…Heya, Natsuki. Over here, over here!" Someone called out her name with an odd, overly familiar tone of voice.

Tch. Natsuki Minamiya, not only an English teacher at Saikai Academy, but also a national Attack Mage known as "the Witch of the Void," made an unpleasant click of her tongue.

"First, Kojou Akatsuki, now you… I've told you enough times not to call your homeroom teacher by her first name!"

As she spoke, the target of her glare was a young man with spiky hair that was combed back. He was dressed in a black suit—the uniform of the Gigafloat Management Corporation's Investigative Division. He wore headphones around his neck while making an impudent leer.

"I thought something must have happened to be called directly to the corporation… Your doing, Yaze?"

"Sorry about this. We're a bit shorthanded here, y'see."

Covering his yawning mouth with a hand as he spoke, Motoki Yaze led Natsuki into the center of the room.

It was a room that greatly resembled an operating room of a hospital. A girl who didn't look even ten years old was lying on top of a bed surrounded by high-end medical devices. Her entire body was wrapped with bandages as if she'd been gravely injured.

And for some reason, both of her arms and legs were firmly secured with thick metallic devices.

Natsuki hmphed through her nose as she looked down, unmoved.

"…So this is the fifth? Looks like they really put on a show last night."

“Oh yeah. So far, reports coming in of two buildings half-wrecked, five set on fire, blackouts, water shortages… But still better than the alternative. It’s all commercial districts with few civilians nearby.” Yaze had a cynical look on his face as he explained.

There had been an incident the night before in Itogami Island’s western district, Island West.

Two unregistered demons possessing high-combat capabilities engaged in prolonged battle above urban areas. Buildings in the area caught up in that fighting had suffered heavy damage.

This girl, apprehended with heavy injuries, was one of those unregistered demons.

“…I heard that she was fighting someone else?”

“We don’t know who she is. It’s been a real pain trying to track her down.”

Natsuki raised her eyebrows, taking delight in hearing Yaze’s morose-sounding words.

“So even you couldn’t chase her down?”

“Ah, there ain’t no way. She’s outta my league.”

Yaze scratched his head as he spoke.

Motoki Yaze was a Hyper-Adapter—not a demon, but a human born with exceptional abilities. Using a type of psychic power, his special ability allowed him to extend his hearing over a wire area, enabling him to track everything within a radius of several kilometers like highly accurate radar.

But even his ability had drawbacks. The field of delicate sound Yaze deployed was vulnerable to big explosive sounds; it wasn’t well suited to monitoring large-scale combat.

And it had one more drawback—namely, *it was powerless against opponents traveling beyond the speed of sound*.

This time, when combat had concluded, the target he was tracking left the battlefield at a speed even his ability couldn’t keep up with. Of course, this was not a feat your average demon could accomplish.

“The report said this girl is an unregistered demon?”

“At the very least, there’s no matching entry in Itogami City’s Demon Registry database. Well, that’s to be expected, given that she’s not a demon to begin with.”

“…Not a demon? She’s one of your kind?”

For once, Natsuki had a look of surprise on her face. Not many things existed that could wreck multiple buildings with flesh and blood that *weren’t* demons. Such feats were all the more unthinkable for ordinary humans.

“Well, y’see, there’re faint traces of sorcerous physical augmentation, but the way the corporation sees it, she should still be thought of as almost totally human.”

“So what, a mere human flew in the skies above a Demon Sanctuary, mowing down buildings in her wake? Don’t make me laugh.”

“Well, there’s no doubt these folks aren’t normal. I’m not laughing, though.”

“How heavy are the girl’s injuries?” Natsuki asked as she shifted her gaze back to the wounded girl.

“They say she’s in stable condition for the moment. They’re using cellular cloning to replace missing internal organs.”

“…Missing organs?”

“Her diaphragm and a kidney… Right around the Manipura Chakra, you could say.”

“So they were eaten…”

Natsuki seemed to spit the words out as she murmured.

The next moment, she heard an innocent-sounding voice from behind her. It was a melodic but sarcastic male voice.

“…Hmph, I see. It was not her internal organs that were taken so much as her energy nodes… Or rather, her very spiritual being… Rather fascinating, isn’t it?”

“Oh, it’s you, Dimitrie Vattler…”

The bearer of the voice poked his head in from the corridor as Natsuki shot him

a glare, an open scowl on her face.

“What’s a bat like you from outside doing here?”

“You’re so cold. And after your country went through all the trouble of asking me to pay you a visit…”

The aristocrat from the Warlord’s Empire that Natsuki had called an outsider smiled cheerfully in the face of Natsuki’s hate-filled stare.

But he was a noble, an Old Guard vampire of the First Primogenitor’s line possessing vast destructive power.

He’d been granted his own autonomous territory within the Warlord’s Empire with vast military might. And currently, he was ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary to Itogami Island.

“Well, that’s very big of you, you snake charmer. When did you get used to being the pet of the Lion King Agency’s vixen?”

Natsuki spoke in a taunting tone. Yaze clutched his head at the threatening atmosphere both were giving off.

“I’ll let that pass without comment. Diplomatic secrecy, you see.”

“A diplomatic secret of the Warlord’s Empire? So your Primogenitor cooked this incident up? Now that’s interesting.”

“I wonder. It could be completely unrelated to *him*.”

“What…?” Natsuki was in shock for a while at Vattler’s half-joking remark. Yaze watched Natsuki’s agitated reaction with a dubious look on his face. Apparently he hadn’t been told the details that would have given Vattler’s declaration meaning to him.

Natsuki glared at Vattler, a thin haze of bloodlust rising from her doll-like visage.

“‘Snake charmer…’ What do you know?”

“Do you recall hearing the name *Ragnvald*, Witch of the Void?”

“…An armored airship belonging to Aldegia in Northern Europe. The flagship of the Knights of the Blessed Ring.”

“This isn’t public knowledge yet, but last night it vanished without a trace. It last transmitted its location some one hundred and sixty kilometers west of Itogami Island.”

Natsuki’s expression turned grave at Vattler’s report, which seemed unrelated to him at first glance.

“So you’re saying this incident is related to the Aldegian royal family?”

“Well, there’s no actual proof. Don’t you think the timing’s a little too convenient, though? Well, either way, I’m going to just stand back and watch this time. Don’t worry, I’m not inclined to lift a finger.”

“That’s quite a bold statement coming from a combat maniac like you.” Natsuki glared at Vattler, her eyes showing no hint of trust whatsoever.

To an unaging, undying, long-lived, and very bored Old Guard vampire, fighting a powerful enemy was the best way to kill time and give meaning to one’s life. Surely Vattler couldn’t ask for a better playmate than an unknown monster capable of flying at supersonic speeds and wrecking buildings left and right.

But the aristocrat from the Warlord’s Empire curled up the edges of his lips in a pleasant smile.

“*They* are not your enemies. It might be unexpectedly interesting to simply let them be and watch.”

“…And you expect me to believe one word you say?”

“It’s friendly advice. Whether you heed it or not is up to you.” Vattler recited in an indifferent tone. Then, as if suddenly remembering something…

“This isn’t to get payback for that information, but I have a request to make of you.”

“I’ll hear you out at least. What is it?” Natsuki asked bluntly. For a single instant, Vattler’s blue eyes were dyed red in genuine bloodlust.

This was no doubt meant for Natsuki’s benefit. Even the stout building that was Keystone Gate creaked from the surge of thick magical energy he gave off.

“Do not involve the Fourth Primogenitor in this.”

“…Kojou Akatsuki? Why?”

Natsuki raised her eyebrows at the unexpected request. Vattler slumped his shoulders in annoyance.

“Because he cannot defeat *her*. It would be inconvenient for me were my beloved Fourth Primogenitor to perish so soon.”

5

The next day: Thursday after classes.

Two adorable kittens with black-and-white spots slept softly side by side in a cardboard box. A male student with delicate facial features was peering inside. This was Kojou’s classmate, Haruka Uchida.

“Sorry, Uchida. Really saving my bacon here.”

“It’s cool. Everyone in my family loves animals, anyway.”

Kojou handed the cardboard box with the kittens over as Uchida spoke with a bright smile. These were two of the abandoned kittens Kanon Kanase had been caring for at the ruined abbey. He’d been calling acquaintances since the night before, finally finding someone who was able to take a couple of them.

Yuuho Tanahara glanced absentmindedly at the playful Uchida and the kittens. She was a blunt, strong-willed girl who often blew her lid at the boys in her class, but right now she was enveloped by an adorable aura as if she was a completely different person. She’d fallen head over heels for Uchida.

“I really didn’t expect you to get friendly with the Saint of Middle School, Akatsuki.”

Yuuho began talking to Kojou out of the blue.

“You know about Kanase?”

“She’s popular with the boys in high school, too. She’s half-Japanese, right? With those looks? Just not fair.”

“Well, I think so, too.”

Kojou nodded in frank acceptance. Kanon was waiting a short distance away out of consideration for her senpai, Kojou. When she realized her eyes had met with Yuuho's, she made an elegant bow, making her silver hair sway.

"But…I kind of have a…hard time with her."

"Hard time?"

Kojou was surprised to hear those words from such a willful girl. Yuuho blushed a little as she quickly said, "Ah, it's not that I hate her or anything. It's just, she lived in an abbey close to this school when she was a kid. Way back, I went there for this and that event, too."

"Right." Kojou nodded as he recalled the sight of the ruined abbey. He realized that he hadn't actually heard why the abbey had been closed in the first place.

"…There was an incident, a bunch of people died… That girl was the only survivor," Yuuho murmured, her expression sinking into gloom. The content of her words didn't really hit Kojou at first.

"They didn't tell me the details, but it was apparently a pretty horrible incident. Friends of mine died in it, too… It's a little hard for me to deal with her because I'm reminded of it every time I look at her, even though I know it's not her fault at all."

Seeing how pale Kojou was, Yuuho forced out a smile.

"Well, it's nothing you need to worry about, Akatsuki. Just forget about it. More importantly, between the transfer student and the saint, you really shouldn't tease Aiba so much."

"…It's got nothing to do with Asagi. I got asked to help Kanase find people to take in some cats and that's it."

"Yeah, yeah."

Yuuho irreverently brushed off Kojou's excuses. Somehow feeling an unpleasant tug at his thoughts, Kojou thanked Uchida once more and parted ways from them.

"So we found people willing to take in all of 'em, huh?" Kojou asked as he met up with Kanon under the shade of a schoolyard tree. Kanon made a happy-

looking nod.

“Yes. Those were the last of them. Thank you very much…”

“Nah… The only ones I found someone to take in were those two…”

Kojou made a pained smile as he spoke. Of course, finding homes for ten kittens wasn’t a one-or two-day job. This was the product of several days of hard work between both Kanon and Nagisa.

“Glad we finally finished the job, though.”

“I suppose so. Now all that’s left is the one I picked up earlier, but I can manage that on my own.”

“…Wait, you picked up another one?!”

Kojou was naturally in shock as he caught sight of the kitten in the blanket Kanon was holding.

It was hard enough caring for only one abandoned cat, yet here was Kanon taking care of one after another; it had to be a considerable burden on her. It was something that couldn’t be explained by a simple love of animals; Kojou felt a fierce motive behind it. And just as Kojou was about to spontaneously ask why she was going so far…

“…My, a delicious-looking kitten there.”

A small woman with a parasol raised emerged from the side.

“Natsuki?”

“Don’t call your homeroom teacher by her first name.”

Kojou let out an anguished groan as he sustained a ferocious elbow strike to his side. Natsuki Minamiya looked back at the suffering Kojou with an upbeat look.

“Did you know, Kojou Akatsuki? It’s forbidden to bring small animals onto school grounds. So, I’ll be confiscating that kitten. I was planning to have stew tonight, anyway…”

Kanon sucked in her breath with a sharp “hiu!” at Natsuki’s casually conveyed words. Seeing her reaction, Natsuki smiled at her as if she was licking her lips.

Clutching the blanket-wrapped kitten, Kanon backed off, as if frightened.

“…I’m sorry, I must run away.”

“R-right.”

Kojou sighed as he beheld Kanon running off, her silver hair swaying all the while.

Somehow, Natsuki looked somewhat wounded as she tapered her lips.

“Hmph. Can’t take a joke. She didn’t have to run like her life depended on it.”

“It doesn’t sound like a joke when *you* say it.”

Kojou made an exhausted-sounding sigh. Natsuki glared at Kojou like that had been beyond the pale.

“Incidentally, who was that brat just now?”

“Who calls students of her own school brats? Sheesh. She’s Kanon Kanase, middle school, third-year.”

“She puts a lot of attention into her hair. Teenage rebellion?”

“No, no, it ain’t that at all. She said her dad was a foreigner, so it’s probably ’cause of that? Not that she told me details about her dad or even what country he was from…”

“Is that so?” Looking like she was filing that away for future reference, Natsuki said, “Hmm,” but she immediately raised her face, looking at Kojou. “Well, fine. Kojou Akatsuki, you’re coming with me tonight.”

“…Huh?! Um, ah, what exactly do you mean by…?”

“What’s with that reaction? I want you to help me with *work*.”

Kojou made a disagreeable face as he replied with a question. “…You mean, Attack Mage work?”

Natsuki shot him a cold look. “You know that there was combat in urban areas in West a few days back?”

“…Yeah, I heard from class that it was unregistered demons going nuts and stuff, but…”

Kojou made a vague nod. He remembered how Asagi had complained about the ruckus costing her sleep.

“It wasn’t unregistered demons running wild. Don’t spread that around, though.”

“Not demons…? Who, then?”

“I don’t know. We’ve apprehended one of them, but their true nature remains unclear.”

Natsuki spoke in an animated tone. Kojou had a really bad feeling about this.

“If you captured one of them, then the other one got away?”

“Right. And the other night wasn’t the first fighting that’s taken place in urban areas, either. There’ve been five similar smaller-scale incidents over the last two weeks.”

“Five…?!

“Seriously?” said Kojou, If what Natsuki said was true, that was about one urban battle every three days or so. *That’s like a round-robin soccer tournament*, thought Kojou with a scowl on his face. “So you figure there might be another incident just like that taking place tonight…”

“Very perceptive, Kojou Akatsuki.”

Elegantly inclining her frilly parasol, Natsuki made a charming, satisfied-looking smile.

“…So all this being the case, I want you to assist me in apprehending the suspects. After all, even I have difficulty catching several suspects at the same time by myself.”

“No, no, no…” Kojou fervently shook his head.

Natsuki was one of the very few people who knew of his true nature. That an unregistered demon like Kojou could continue living as an ordinary high school student was thanks to the strings she was pulling as an Attack Mage.

But the price of that was that Natsuki occasionally asked him to help her with her side jobs. Invariably, Kojou had a near-death experience as a result.

“I get the circumstances, but why do I have to help you out? Ain’t there anyone else?!”

“Astarte is still being readjusted. She’s only just finished healing from the gunshot wounds Gardos gave her… But if you refuse to cooperate, I suppose I’ll have to have her help, anyway?”

Natsuki invoked the name of the homunculus she had been granted protective custody of. Kojou couldn’t help but shudder at Natsuki’s underhanded negotiating tactics, as if she was using an injured person as a hostage.

“Also, Dimitrie Vattler gave me a warning. He said not to involve you in this incident.”

“The heck?! Aren’t you completely ignoring his warning, then?!”

“If it annoys him, of course I’m going to do it.”

Pettiness notwithstanding, Natsuki grandly puffed up her chest as she spoke.

“We’ll rendezvous at nine PM at Thetis Mall. Don’t be late. If you’re even *one second* late, I’ll send compromising pictures of you and Aiba in the art classroom to the cell phones of all your classmates.”

“…Why do *you* have something like that?!”

Kojou let out an unrestrained shriek at Natsuki’s earth-shaking pronouncement.

“Because I’m your homeroom teacher.

“Huhuun,” went Natsuki with a proud smile. Kojou couldn’t judge how much she was joking and how much she was dead serious. *She really is a woman with no conscience*, thought Kojou.

“…Gimme a break,” Kojou murmured helplessly as he watched Natsuki casually walk off.

The crimson setting sun seemed to burn into the top of his head. Night would soon visit the Demon Sanctuary of Itogami Island…

Thetis Mall was a commercial district right in the center of Island West.

It was a convenient place with specialty shops, restaurants, and movie theaters lined up side by side, but Kojou didn't really like how they were, quite naturally, all jumbled together. He liked even less the lethal crowd density in front of the station on Friday nights and on weekends. Natsuki appeared at the rendezvous point within those crowds just before eleven PM, or nearly two hours after the appointed time had passed.

"…You're late! And the heck's with that outfit?! Aren't you doing Attack Mage work here?!"

Glaring as Natsuki walked over in a showy *yukata*, Kojou shouted, heedless of those being bothered around him.

But Natsuki's expression did not change.

"Don't get excited, brat. I saw there was a festival at a shopping district nearby. I thought I'd treat Astarte to some nighttime shopping."

"At least call to let me know that, geez!"

"What are you angry for? I even bought you some fried octopus. Here, eat."

"…Well that's nice of you."

Natsuki offered the package of fried octopus; Kojou indignantly took it.

In front of Kojou, a little girl with what somehow seemed to be an artificially beautiful face quietly bowed her head.

She had indigo-colored hair and a perfectly symmetrical, doll-like face. She was Astarte the homunculus. She, like Natsuki, was wearing a *yukata*. Her pale, lavender-colored eyes really went well with her hair.

"We are one hour, fifty-six minutes late to our rendezvous. I apologize, Fourth Primogenitor."

"Nah, you don't have anything to apologize for. …Did you have fun?"

"…Affirmative," Astarte curtly replied. Her tone was as robotic as usual, but she did seem cheerful.

During that time, Natsuki's gaze shifted to behind Kojou with an annoyed,

reproachful look.

“And what are *you* doing here, transfer student?”

“I am the Fourth Primogenitor’s watcher, after all,” replied Yukina, wearing her school uniform and carrying her guitar case on her back.

As if a matter of course, Yukina, having learned that Kojou was going to go with Natsuki out on a job, had insisted on accompanying him.

“Well, fine. It doesn’t hurt to have another pair of hands. Why don’t you put on a *yukata*, too? You can rent them in front of the station.”

“…I’m fine, thank you.”

Though the short pause preceding her reply seemed to carry a small twinge of regret, Yukina strongly shook her head.

“More importantly, why are you bringing a dangerous individual like Akatsuki out on an unsafe mission such as this? You do understand the enormous damage that would occur if senpai’s Beast Vassals ran wild in an urban area such as…”

“And what would you do if he was dragged into fighting without even a clue what was going on, Sword Shaman? Don’t you think that’s even more dangerous?”

“Th…that might well be so, but…”

Yukina’s willfulness abated in the face of Natsuki’s unexpectedly straightlaced rebuttal. Natsuki added more, as if to press her advantage.

“Surely it’s safer to keep something dangerous close at hand, not in a distant place where you cannot see.”

“Uu…”

Yukina’s shoulders slumped in dejection at how easily she’d been dressed down. Kojou, who’d just been called a dangerous individual by both girls, twisted his lips with a feeling of dismay.

Without displaying any special pride in victory, Natsuki led Kojou and Yukina onto an elevator. Licking a candy apple she’d bought at a stall, she asked Kojou, as if she’d just remembered…

“Did you read the data I sent by e-mail?”

“Well, I skimmed it. Masked, was it? So we’ve just gotta capture this thing?”

“More precisely, capture both Masked.”

Natsuki spoke high-handedly as she replied with a tone befitting a teacher.

Masked was a code name for the mysterious monsters doing battle over and in the skies above Itogami City.

According to witnesses in previous cases, the Masked always appeared in pairs, with combat apparently continuing until one or the other collapsed. Naturally, Natsuki was thinking it was highly probable that two would appear simultaneously this night as well.

“Capturing them’ll be easier said than done. I dunno what to do about guys who can fly around…”

“No need for concern. Shoot them down,” Natsuki replied instantly and without hesitation.

“That’s nuts,” Kojou groaned.

“After all, if you’re letting your Beast Vassals loose toward the sky, there’ll be no ill effects on the city.”

“Er, that might be true, but, uh…”

“They’re monsters of no small measure themselves. Don’t worry, they won’t bite the dust that easily. Even if you slip up and kill one, they’ll just toss you in a jail cell.”

“Don’t worry, my ass! What the hell?! Can’t I get a ‘not guilty’ here?!” Kojou clutched his head and yelled at Natsuki’s declaration, which was over the top even for her.

The elevator kept rising until finally arriving at the top floor. From there, they switched to a service elevator and moved onto the roof. At ten stories tall, Thetis Mall was the tallest building in the area. It was an ideal location for spotting the flight-capable Masked.

“At any rate, that is rather strange.”

“It’s not ‘rather’… It’s totally messed up!”

“I don’t mean your treatment, senpai, I mean that building…”

Yukina was pointing at an office building on the other side of an intersection.

The upper half of the brand-new structure was thoroughly gouged out; even now, rubble that had been scattered about was piled up on the roadway. The ghastly scene looked like a meteorite strike.

“Even though there was such a large explosion, I never noticed a thing. If that destructive power had been generated by a spell or a summons, quite a bit of magical energy should have been released.”

“Meaning, even a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency could not detect it… just as I suspected,” Natsuki murmured with a curious look of acceptance.

“The magic energy detectors placed around Itogami Island’s interior didn’t respond to the Masked, either. The Island Guard only realized something was wrong when buildings were wrecked and civilian security corps kicked up a fuss.”

“What does this mean…?”

“I don’t know. Special kinds of spells, physical attacks… There are a number of possibilities I can think of.”

After those words, an aggressive smile came over Natsuki’s face.

“Well, we won’t really know until we ask the persons concerned… Don’t kill them, Akatsuki.”

Natsuki was glaring in the direction of the sky above a giant cell tower standing outside the shopping district.

Things enveloped in malevolent light were dancing in the dark nighttime sky. Their movements were far too unorthodox to be those of aircraft. They were bizarre silhouettes near human in size engaging in fierce aerial combat.

“…The Masked?!”

“They appeared sooner than I expected. Astarte, tell the corporation, ‘It’s time for the fireworks.’”

“Accept.”

Having received Natsuki's orders, Astarte took a radio transmitter from a sleeve of her *yukata* and operated it.

Kojou gave it a suspicious look.

"Natsuki, what do you mean by 'fireworks'?"

"What, young people nowadays don't know what launching fireworks is?"

Spreading her beloved parasol, Natsuki smiled cutely, as if astounded at how dense he was. A moment later, Kojou heard a *boom* behind him. Colored fireworks bloomed into a large floral pattern in the sky.

They were actual fireworks. The launch point looked like it was right in the opposite direction of where the Masked had appeared.

"Now the public's eyes should be looking in that direction. That should gloss over a few extra explosions and the like."

"I see… Wait, don't tell me the night shopping you were doing was for this…?!"

Rather than admiration, Kojou was frankly shocked at the unexpected depth of Natsuki's preparations.

Certainly, the great roar and dazzling flashes of a fireworks launch was ideal for hiding the existence of the Masked. Even if witnesses saw a number of flashes and explosions away from the show, they probably wouldn't be especially suspicious.

But Kojou took from the mere fact that such an elaborate deception was necessary in a Demon Sanctuary like Itogami Island as proof that this incident was extremely serious.

"We'll settle this while the public is distracted by fireworks before they can catch on. We're jumping."

"Huh? Whaddaya mean 'ju—'" Kojou looked back as Natsuki's abrupt call to him gave him a bad premonition.

That same moment, Kojou was assaulted by fierce dizziness. Shortly after, he felt an unpleasant sense of vertigo like he was in free fall. When that finally subsided, Kojou was in abject shock at the realization he'd been tossed right on top of a high, unfamiliar tower.

“…Whoaaaaa?! What the heck am I doing *here*…?!”

Almost losing his footing, Kojou hurried to a nearby girder poking out and clung to it for dear life.

This was the cell tower’s skeleton of girders painted red and white. They were directly under the Masked engaged in combat. Natsuki had used teleportation magic, a specialty of hers, dragging him along for the ride.

“Senpai, above you! Look out…!”

Yukina, brought along for the ride with Kojou, shouted sharply as she looked above her head.

As Kojou lifted his face in response to her voice, he sucked in his breath as he unexpectedly found himself looking at the Masked at very short range.

Both Masked had the forms of little girls.

But the girls had hideous, bloodstained, mismatched wings sprouting from their backs.

The surface of their bare arms and legs bore ghastly geometric shapes, with countless ghoulish eyeball symbols on the masks that covered both girls’ heads.

As the girls spread their wings, they launched undulating, warped swords of light, shooting down one shimmering, mirage-like wall after another.

When the swords of light fell out of the sky, they turned into incandescent flames, setting the buildings and streets below on fire one after another.

The battle between the two intensified, instantly increasing the damage to the shopping district.

“…I see. Certainly creepy. I do not know that type of magical formula,” Natsuki murmured in the casual tone of an irresponsible observer. “Yes. Rather than sorcery, it is more like…the divine possession that we employ…”

Nodding at Natsuki’s words, Yukina drew her silver-colored spear from its guitar case.

The spear’s shaft slid to its full length; the sheathed blade deployed, extending side blades to the left and right. It was a beautiful, all-metal spear that looked

the part of a glossy, modern weapon.

“A ‘Schneewaltzer’…perfect. Lend me a hand, Yukina Himeragi. We’ll knock them out of the sky.”

Without warning or waiting for Yukina to reply, Natsuki made a wave of her right hand.

That instant, the space around her seemed to warp with a ripple. Then, a giant, silver-colored chain shot out of thin air like an arrow, wrapping around the Masked soaring in the sky.

The next moment, Yukina kicked off from a steel girder, leaping into the air.

Kojou merely held his breath and watched.

Yukina sailed until landing on top of a chain stretched across the sky. Paying no heed to the dizzying height, she sprinted along the chain.

“…Snowdrift Wolf!”

Responding to the prayer Yukina invoked, her spear became enveloped in a dazzling, holy light.

The spear she had been granted, dubbed Snowdrift Wolf, was a Mechanical Demon-Purging Assault Spear Type Seven, aka “Schneewaltzer,” a secret weapon of the Lion King Agency. It was their trump card for anti-demon combat, able to neutralize magical energy and rend through any barrier. No ward sorcery could defend against its attack.

With the Masked bewildered by the unexpected intruders, Yukina poised her spear and thrust its shining, glimmering blade into one of the warped wings… But…

“Eh?!”

The moment they clashed, Yukina sucked in her breath at the bizarre feedback to her hands.

The ominous light covering the Masked had grown brighter. That radiance had repelled a direct hit from Snowdrift Wolf.

Sparks ferociously scattered as the blade that was surely able to rend all

barriers bounced off the invisible wall.

The black, mismatched wings spread as the Masked cried out. The chains that bound them were blown off; Yukina, caught up in the shock wave, was sent flying as well.

“…Himeragi?!”

“They severed Laeding…?!” Kojou and Natsuki shouted simultaneously.

Yukina, thrown into the sky, swung her spear, using the reaction to control her direction, and landed safely upon the cell tower once more. It was a beautiful, supple martial arts technique worthy of a hawk. However, she wore a steely expression. Her Schneewaltzer, able to slay without fail even a Primogenitor, was ineffective against the Masked.

“Are you all right, Himeragi?!”

“I’m all right. However…”

Nodding back to Kojou as he rushed over, Yukina looked up at the now-free Masked.

Both of the Masked had stopped fighting each other out of vigilance against Kojou’s group’s attacks. One of the two escaped to higher altitude while looking down at Kojou and the others; the remaining one trembled with anger as she charged the tower. Below her mask, her lips burst open into a shrill cry as her entire body emitted a red light.

“No!”

The attack by the Masked gouged a hemispheric hole out of the cell tower’s base. Natsuki’s expression froze over as she beheld the sight.

No longer able to support its own weight, the cell tower leaned and slowly fell, girders snapping and scattering along the way. It was falling toward a thoroughfare brimming with traffic and a gaggle of buildings on the opposing side. At this rate, great disaster was unavoidable.

“Akatsuki, I’m leaving them to you! Don’t hold back—you’ll die if you do!”

Leaving behind a one-sided declaration, Natsuki teleported, all sight of her vanishing.

“Huh?! Wait a…”

Kojou was dumbfounded as he watched the ripple in space left behind her. *That’s a lot easier said than done*, thought Kojou; his hands were literally full from clinging to the collapsing tower to not be thrown clear of it.

But as the steel tower’s tilt reached some thirty degrees, its descent suddenly came to a halt. Without fanfare, countless chains stretched forth from the ground, entwining around the tower to protect it from destruction.

Though its tilt made it look less stable than the Tower of Pisa, the steel tower somehow regained its balance and remained aloft in the sky. This was no doubt Natsuki’s doing. However, it seemed that even she could not hold up a steel tower weighing several hundred tons and take on the Masked at the same time.

The berserker Masked plunged down toward the cell tower once more.

Looking up and seeing that, Kojou’s eyes were tinged red in anger and fear.

“Ah, crap! C’mon over, Beast Vassal Number Nine, Al-Nasl Minium…!”

Responding to the call of its master, the Beast Vassal materialized from the enormous magical energy Kojou released.

It was huge and ferocious, a two-horned horse: an incandescent bicorn, shimmering like a mirage.

Vampires were served by the Beast Vassals within their very own blood. They were destructive magical energy given form. The otherworldly summoned beasts consumed their host’s life force from the mere act of emerging in this world.

Only vampires, bearing unlimited “negative” life forces, could employ those Beast Vassals… It was for this very reason, vampires were the most feared among all demonkind.

Even the weakest Beast Vassal possessed striking power rivaling that of a cutting-edge fighter plane, whereas the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor, the World’s Mightiest Vampire, were menaces no different from natural disasters. If Kojou lost control for even a moment, worst case, the entirety of Itogami Island might be burned to a crisp.

It was such a malevolent Beast Vassal that glared and roared at the onrushing

Masked.

The roar transformed into a shock wave cannonball, assailing the Masked straight from the front. The oscillations it gave off made the cell tower creak and shudder and shattered glass windows of buildings all around them. But…

“What…?!”

Even sustaining a frontal attack from the bicorn able to rend the very atmosphere, the Masked calmly continued dancing in the sky. Its flesh was completely unharmed. Even the attacks of Kojou’s Beast Vassals were ineffective against the Masked.

“Oh no… It can withstand even attacks from a Primogenitor’s Beast Vassal?!”

Yukina’s voice trembled as she watched, dumbfounded, as the Masked spread its misshapen wings. Having seen the destructive power of a Beast Vassal up close several times over, she was, in a sense, even more shaken than Kojou was.

Glaring at the enemy that had impudently withstood its attack, the incandescent Beast Vassal moved decisively, launching a direct blow. However, the result was the same; the bicorn’s charge, surrounded by a ferocious oscillation wave, slid right over the Masked like water off a duck. Even if Yukina’s spear was capable of nullifying a Beast Vassal’s magical energy, this did not mean the two were equivalent in power.

Yet even this buffeted the Masked no more than a gentle breeze.

Just like how throwing a pebble into a lake could not harm what was reflected upon its surface, Kojou’s Beast Vassal could not touch the Masked. That fact shocked Kojou to the core. Then…

“Not good…!”

Realizing the Masked was forming a gigantic sword of light, Kojou’s entire body froze over. He couldn’t even calculate the casualties that releasing an attack like that in the middle of an urban area like this would cause.

Yukina raised Snowdrift Wolf in a hurling posture, aiming to strike her foe down in midair. However, it had already been proven that her spear was ineffective against the Masked. Kojou instantly began trying to summon his

second Beast Vassal. But if Al-Nasl Minium couldn't touch his opponent, would his other Beast Vassal, Regulus Aurum, fare any better…?!

Fighting off premonitions of despair, Kojou raised his right arm to the sky. It was the next moment when…

"Wha—?!"

…a beam of light flew through the sky above him, going right through the Masked, reading its sword of light.

The beam of light was actually a small silhouette with misshapen wings—the other Masked that had been watching their battle from above.

The first Masked let out an anguished cry as she was struck by the surprise attack from the blind spot behind her.

The "beam" having shot through her, she crashed right into the guts of the cell tower. She writhed around as fresh blood splashed all around her.

The second Masked pounced on her from above, using her talon-tipped arms to mercilessly gouge out her wounded comrade's body. Ribs snapped, bare flesh rent; the misshapen wings were torn right off.

The first Masked continued to fiercely resist, but victory and defeat had been determined by the first blow. The heavily wounded Masked inflicted only light injury upon her comrade before she herself stopped moving.

"Was she…protecting us…?" Kojou murmured as he stared at the side of the blood-splattered face of the Masked.

What she did couldn't be written off as a mere surprise attack, with her picking her timing through careful assessment of the combat situation. It felt clear to him that she'd acted with the goal of saving Kojou and the others from their predicament.

Even Yukina, keeping her guard up as she held her spear, had a faint look of bewilderment come over her.

Right before their eyes, the plate that covered the head of the Masked came off. The metal mask was cracked all over from the attacks of her comrade.

Symbols on the surface of her bare skin, resembling electrical circuits,

illuminated her uncovered face.

“…That’s crazy! That face… She’s…?!”

“It can’t be…”

The instant they beheld her beautiful, too-young visage, Kojou and Yukina were at a loss for words.

She had silver hair reminiscent of a snowy plain and pale blue eyes that glittered like a glacier…

Bearing misshapen wings, her bare flesh covered with bizarre symbols, it was Kanon Kanase. The middle school schoolgirl, who loved animals and who always had a gentle smile on her face, was completely drenched in blood spatter as she looked down at her fellow Masked.

“…Kanase, stop…!”

Realizing what she was about to do, Kojou let out a disjointed cry.

Kanon’s beautiful visage twisted as her mouth opened wide. Growing in her mouth cavity were countless fangs like those of a great white shark. Kanon’s fangs bit into the bare, exposed neck of her comrade, lying upon the cell tower…

“Kanase……!”

As Kojou yelled, an incredible amount of blood gushed out before their eyes.

Her throat rent, the body of the wounded Masked heavily convulsed.

Tears flowed from Kanase's pale blue eyes as she bit into the torn-off piece of flesh.

That moment, Kojou finally understood the meaning of this battle. They were being made to fight each other so that one would consume the other. Kanon was consuming her fellow Masked.

Kanon, having finally completed her objective, spread her wings and soared into the sky once more.

Her form, surrounded by that malevolent light, suddenly blended into the sky and vanished from sight.

Kojou and the others could only watch her go, shocked.

All that remained were heavy traces of destruction and the gravely wounded Masked girl…

A breeze carrying the scent of blood blew through the moonless sky over the city.

Chapter Three
The Island of Exile

CHAPTER THREE

THE ISLAND OF EXILE

1

The next day: Saturday…

Kojou, having passed the night without a single wink of sleep, came out of the Island North monorail station together with Yukina.

The Demon Sanctuary of Itogami City was a research and development city. The island was cramped with big corporations manufacturing pharmaceuticals, precision machinery, and high-tech materials, etc., and several well-known academic research agencies.

This place, Island North Section Two's Magia Valley, was known for having a particularly high concentration of large-scale research facilities. It was a futuristic-looking area with strong traces of being part of a man-made island.

"…Magus Craft?" Kojou asked Yukina while looking up at the YOU ARE HERE map in front of the station.

Yukina unfolded a handwritten memo and double-checked.

"Yes. The address Nagisa gave me for Kanase is the address for Magus Craft Incorporated."

"…That's a company that makes cleaning robots, isn't it?" Kojou mumbled as he located a memory in the back of his mind. He'd definitely seen the name on trash compactors for buildings, rug-polishing machines, and household-cleaning robots.

"That's right. It's a corporation known mainly for manufacturing Automata for commercial purposes. It has a research facility here in Itogami City, and Kanase's

current father works there.”

“…*Current* father…? Oh right, Kanase lived at an abbey?”

“Yes. I heard that he took Kanase in after the abbey was shut down.” As Yukina spoke the words, she lowered her eyes with a somewhat conflicted look. No doubt Yukina, an orphan raised by the Lion King Agency, had empathy rather than pity for Kanon’s circumstances.

Kojou scratched his head with a sober look.

“Normally you’d think that was a good thing, but…after seeing that yesterday, I dunno…”

“Agreed. There seems a bit more to the story.”

Yukina nodded in her overly serious demeanor. Then, she suddenly lifted her face up with apparent concern.

“Have you spoken to…Ms. Minamiya about Kanase?”

“Not yet. More like, I can’t yet. She might not know that the Masked girl’s really Kanase. We need a bit more info one way or another…”

Kojou’s face twisted in anguish as he exhaled.

Of course, he didn’t think his own judgment was absolutely correct, either. It might have been best to leave preventing further damage in Natsuki’s hands. However, Kojou wasn’t a member of the Island Guard; he was just a student. He wasn’t inclined to hand an acquaintance over to the Gigafloat Management Corporation without any idea of the circumstances involved. He at least wanted to talk to Kanon once beforehand.

Unusually, Yukina didn’t try to scold Kojou at all; she simply murmured, “It can’t be helped, then.”

“This is…where she lives?”

“This building is listed as her address…”

Having finally arrived at their destination, Kojou and Yukina spent a while silently standing there in place.

It was an aggressively standing structure entirely encased in reflective glass. It

looked like a cold, lifeless office building, not somewhere anyone would actually live. If this was really where Kanon lived, it would mean she lived not in a house, but inside a corporate laboratory.

While that was far from the worst of all things, that fact just didn't fit with their image of Kanon. At the very least, hardly lent itself to raising a kitten.

As Kojou and Yukina made their way into the lobby, a young girl at the reception desk spoke up to them. "…Welcome."

"Ah… Excuse me, we'd like to meet Kanon Kanase who lives at this address?"

Kojou made an awkward, polite smile as he stated his business.

The receptionist looked up at Kojou with a detached look in her eyes. Kojou realized that she wasn't human. She was a robot… An Automata built to mimic a human being.

"Kanon Kanase of room 204 is currently absent."

The receptionist spoke informatively, her fingers typing on a keyboard all the while.

"Do you know when she'll be back?"

"I do not know."

The receptionist's calm, polite reaction gave Kojou a creepy feeling he couldn't put into words.

Even though she, too, was a man-made construct, her nature was completely different from Astarte.

Astarte was a *human being* made through artificial means, but this receptionist was a *machine* only pretending to be human. She did not possess free will. How she behaved just like a human being in spite of that really creeped Kojou out. The cold malaise he felt was a good match for that which he felt hanging about the whole Magus Craft Incorporated building.

"Is Mr. Kensei Kanase at home?" Yukina opened her mouth in place of the now-silent Kojou. This Kensei Kanase was no doubt Kanon's guardian.

"Please pardon me, but you are?"

“Himeragi of the Lion King Agency,” Yukina replied to the receptionist’s question with the name of her organization. That surprised Kojou a little.

Bringing up the name of the Lion King Agency in a situation having nothing to do with her formal mission wasn’t something he expected out of the highly diligent Yukina. And the corresponding reply from the receptionist was somewhat outside their expectations, too.

“…Understood. Please wait over there briefly.”

As the receptionist spoke, she pointed to a sofa for guests in the central lobby.

“What does she mean by ‘understood’?”

“I’m not certain, but it seems good for us.”

Although a little bewildered, Kojou and Yukina sat on the sofa and waited as they’d been told.

The expensive sofa felt very comfortable to sit on, but it was impossible to relax in the middle of a huge lobby like this. Kojou felt like they were on display.

After waiting for about fifteen minutes, with Kojou beginning to feel bored, he saw someone getting off the elevator in the back of the lobby. It was a foreign woman dressed in a wine-red suit.

The woman had ornate blond hair. With high heels on, she was probably taller than Kojou. From one glance at her, she was a stylish, sensual, beautiful woman. The legs emerging from under her tight skirt had bewitching body lines.

“That’s not…Kanase’s dad, is it?”

Kojou narrowed his eyes in suspicion as he muttered.

“A registered demon, it would seem.”

Yukina let Kojou’s airheaded remark slide and pointed out that fact.

The woman was wearing a metallic bracelet about five centimeters wide on her right arm over her suit. It was a demon registration bracelet from the Gigafloat Management Corporation.

Those bracelets monitored a demon’s body and prevented the activation of special abilities; in exchange, Itogami City granted demons full citizenship. So

long as they bore their demon registration bracelets, they had the right to receive an education or employment, the same as any normal human being.

But to Kojou and the other residents of this Demon Sanctuary, a registration bracelet was by no means a rare sight. What drew in Kojou's eyes was rather the sensuality of the woman's presence.

"She's…pretty gorgeous, huh?" Kojou unintentionally voiced his thoughts out loud while staring at how the woman's breasts thrust out from the top of her suit. As Kojou did so, Yukina glared at him from the side, making a sigh of displeasure.

"That's rude, senpai… Or rather, those indecent eyes of yours are already looking rather criminal."

As Kojou underwent a bit of shock at her words going so far, the woman in the red suit halted in front of Kojou and Yukina. An alluring smile came over her, as if trying to bewitch those gazing at her.

"I'm sorry. Did I make you wait for very long?"

"No… We are quite sorry for the sudden visit," Yukina replied, refusing to be overawed. Perhaps she'd judged, now that she had declared herself part of the Lion King Agency, she could show no weakness. Nor was there any sign of her being cowed by the difference in height between her and the woman opposite her, nearly two hundred centimeters tall.

Looking back at Yukina, the woman in the red suit displayed a bit of surprise in her eyes.

"You're the ones from last n…"

"Ah?"

"No, pardon me. I simply didn't think an Attack Mage from the Lion King Agency would be so young," The woman continued in a businesslike tone, shaking her head as if nothing had happened.

"I am Beatrice Basler from the Research Department. I…suppose you might say I am Kensei Kanase's secretary. What business did you have with Kanase today?"

"I'm very sorry, but I cannot say at present. I would like to speak to him in

person.”

Yukina stated it with a hard-sounding voice. The woman calling herself Beatrice nodded, showing no sign of taking offense.

“I understand. However, unfortunately, Kanase is not in today.”

“Not in?”

“That’s right. Kanase is currently off the island. Our firm operates an independent research facility under the jurisdiction of the Demon Sanctuary; that is where he is.”

“Outside of Itogami Island? And would Kan…his daughter be with him?”

“Yes. I heard something to that effect.”

Beatrice made a courteous smile as she nodded.

Itogami Island, which floated atop dragon lines that flowed through the Pacific Ocean, was a site particularly suitable for sorcery. However, as a man-made island, it did have its limits. The effects of waves and currents could not be completely negated, and any magic requiring an unbroken connection to the earth could not be performed whatsoever.

To deal with these shortcomings, corporations based out of the Demon Sanctuary had been authorized to make use of several uninhabited islands that were part of the Izu Islands chain. Perhaps the facility Kensei Kanase was said to be at was on just such an uninhabited island.

“Do you know when the two of them will return here?” Kojou asked with tension mixed in with his voice. Beatrice shook her head with a look of dismay.

“That is unclear. I am not familiar with the details of the project Kanase is currently involved in, so I cannot say…”

“Is…that so…?”

Seeing Kojou so dejected, the woman made a pleasant smile as she spoke.

“However, if it is an urgent matter, I believe it would be faster if you visited the research facility in person.”

“…We can do that?” Kojou’s eyes snapped wide as he asked her back.

“Yes, of course. A light airplane makes two round-trips to the island daily, so you could go along for the ride. I believe you can still make it for the AM flight.”

“Could you…make the arrangements for that?”

“Understood. This way, please.”

Beatrice walked off, beckoning Kojou and Yukina to join her. As Kojou quickly rose to his feet to follow her, for some reason, Yukina was murmuring to herself as she kept her eyes lowered.

“Airplane…”

“Himeragi?”

Kojou looked back with a questioning look.

“No, it’s nothing at all.”

Yukina squeezed her fists as she shook her head. Her lips were slightly pale as they quivered.

2

To the residents of Itogami Island, floating in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, planes were a familiar means of transportation. For this reason, Itogami Island was host to six airports of various sizes.

That said, large passenger planes could only land normally at the central airport. The other five airports were civilian airports with the bare minimum for facilities. The runways weren’t even a hundred meters long. In other words, they were truly simple, minimal facilities without any instrument landing systems or even lights for nighttime landings.

The Northern District commercial airport that Kojou and Yukina were brought to was one such small airport.

The only building standing inside the airport’s perimeter was a small control tower. There were four slightly dirty light passenger airplanes standing atop the runway, but they seemed to have been left behind as an afterthought.

They were most likely old-school propeller planes. They seemed to be private

aircraft owned by Magus Craft.

“Sheesh, that bitch. She calls me all the way back here, and it turns out she wants me to play tour guide for a field trip.”

Standing beside the propeller planes, waiting for Kojou and Yukina, was a long-haired man in a leather jacket. He was fairly tall, and thanks to being overly thin, he had a bit of the look of a model, but his apparently slothful personality was what immediately stood out. An air of thorough disappointment seemed to hang all around the man.

As Yukina and Kojou walked over to the runway, the man gave them a light wave.

“Oh, well… Welcome, guests! I am Lowe Kirishima. I’m something of an errand boy for Beatrice. Well, nice to meet you.”

As Kojou shook the hand Kirishima offered and Yukina traded glances with him, Kirishima made a leering smile as he stared at the guitar case on her back.

“Hmph, I see. Seems you’re not just a couple of students… Well, you get all kinds here in the Demon Sanctuary, huh?”

“Ha-ha…”

As Kojou glossed things over with a vague smile, Kojou’s eyes stopped when they passed over the bracelet Kirishima wore on his wrist. He, like Beatrice, was a demon. He was probably an L-type…a beast man.”

Kojou and Yukina had boarded the plane and were waiting inside when Kirishima called out from the pilot seat. “Well, time to get this girl ready for takeoff.”

After they sat down in the seats behind him, he handed a vinyl sheet bag to Kojou.

“Here you go. Barf bag.”

“Eh?”

For a moment, Kojou was bewildered at why he’d be handed this before even taking off, but he immediately got it as soon as he glanced at the adjacent Yukina’s face. The exceedingly brooding look on Yukina’s face, the way she

gripped her hands together as if in prayer—she was in a near-panic, as if her usual calm, composed air was an illusion. No doubt not even facing the Lotharingian Armed Apostle or the aristocrat from the Warlord's Empire had thrown her off to this degree.

"H-Himeragi? Are you all right?" Now uneasy himself, Kojou asked without thinking.

But Yukina raised a reassuring face as she replied. "Of course. There is no problem whatsoever."

"Er, well, your face turned as white as a sheet…"

"You're just imagining it."

Her reply was crisp, but her voice was frail. As Kojou kept thinking, *She can fight in midair like she's walking a tightrope without a net, so there's no way, right?* he asked…

"…You wouldn't be afraid of airplanes, would you?"

"Absolutely not! I-I am a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency, after all."

As Yukina's childish excuse made Kojou think, *I made better lies in kindergarten*, he stifled the strained smile that threatened to leak out. It was cute that Yukina had an unexpected weakness like this, but he didn't feel like making fun of her when she was so desperately hiding it.

Yukina, who had been coerced into and given no option but living as a Sword Shaman for the Lion King Agency, was not permitted to display weakness before others. After all, such behavior would lose her the only place she had in the world. No doubt that was why Yukina had always pushed herself and behaved decisively since she'd been a little girl.

She couldn't sound weak even in front of trusted friends and allies. Kojou had known a similar type of isolation once before. He'd probably been wrapped in the same emotions when he was on the basketball court.

Finally, Kojou got tired of the isolation and quit basketball. Someone like him had no right to laugh at Yukina.

"Actually, Nagisa's bad with airplanes, too. …Actually, she's bad with any kind

of vehicle. She gets sick right away."

"I told you, it's not as if I have a hard time with airplanes…"

Yukina objected to Kojou's blunt utterance with pouty lips.

Right about then, the airplane they were on began to accelerate down the runway for takeoff. Yukina's entire body froze at the increasingly forceful engine sounds and the shaking of the fuselage.

Seeing how Yukina had already lost her senses, Kojou silently grasped her shaking hands.

"…S-senpai?"

"Ahh, sorry. I thought you might relax more if I was holding your hands. You didn't want me to?"

"I have said no such thing…!"

Yukina spoke in a hasty-seeming tone as her quivering hands grasped Kojou's hand back. Kojou sighed an exasperated sigh as he gazed out the window.

The plane immediately left Itogami Island; it was blue ocean as far as the eye could see. He could very roughly tell their direction by the angle of the sun, but he no longer had any way to know where they actually were whatsoever. The aircraft itself seemed to be running smoothly enough, but the fuselage of the old-style propeller plane was more rickety than he'd expected; Kojou became concerned whether they'd ever make it back. Perhaps Yukina's unease was contagious.

"…I wonder if the research project Kanase's dad is working on is really related to the Masked…" Kojou murmured to himself as if trying to distract his own mind. He wasn't all that worried about Kirishima overhearing them from the front seat inside such a noisy aircraft.

"Yes…I think it is highly likely," Yukina replied with a grave look.

It was a natural conclusion. With those runes of light rising from all over Kanon's monstrous form, it was extremely likely Kanon had undergone some kind of ritual to transform her flesh and blood.

High-level ritual sorcery like that required an organization, plus someone who

could actually perform the ritual on Kanon herself. Kensei Kanase, a sorcerous engineer for a major corporation, as well as Kanon's adoptive father, definitely fit the profile.

"So he altered his own daughter into a monster like that and made her kill her own kind…?"

Kojou made a rude click of his tongue as he muttered. However, Yukina made an even more austere face as she shook her head.

"You probably have the order backward."

"Ah?"

"Kensei Kanase didn't alter his own daughter, but rather…"

"…You mean…he adopted Kanase so he could do this to her…!" The altogether horrible hypothesis colored Kojou's field of vision with rage.

If that orphaned girl, having finally found a family of her own, knew that her father saw her only as raw material for an experiment…

Kojou could no longer even imagine the despair Kanon would face in that moment.

Then, Yukina made what seemed like a frail, self-deprecating smile as she lowered her eyes.

"I might well have a lot in common with Kanase. That's why…" The few words that Yukina spoke finally made Kojou realize the truth of how she felt.

Certainly, there was a lot of overlap between Kanon now and when he'd first met Yukina, raised as a Sword Shaman. As far as Yukina was concerned, one wrong step and it could have been her being used as a guinea pig in Kanon's place. That was why Yukina had invoked the name of the Lion King Agency at Magus Craft Incorporated so they could meet Kensei Kanase: She was desperate in her own way to save Kanon.

"Last night…Kanase saved us, didn't she…?"

Recalling the taste of deadly combat he'd tasted on top of the cell tower, Kojou sought affirmation in a subdued voice. Yukina made a small gasp, lifted her face, and squeezed Kojou's hand more strongly.

“Yes.”

As she nodded firmly, Yukina’s eyes said: *And that’s why this time, I want to save her*. Kojou felt the same way about that. In the end, that was reason enough for Kojou to save Kanon.

But as if mocking their mutual resolve, the airplane suddenly shook hard and began heading down.

“Hey, newlyweds. Sorry to interrupt your lovey-dovey chitchat, but we’re landing.”

As he spoke, Kirishima pointed to a small island floating in the middle of the sea.

It was an island shaped like a half-moon with green forest all over its middle. It couldn’t have been even two kilometers’ radius. It looked like you could complete a stroll around the whole island in half a day. There were no signs of houses from the air. It was a completely uninhabited island.

“That island’s a Magus Craft research facility?”

As the doubtful Kojou asked him, Kirishima made a tedious nod.

“It’s just a nameless, deserted island, but we call it the Goldfish Bowl.”

“Goldfish Bowl?”

When Kojou crooked his neck, thinking, *What’s that supposed to mean?* the airplane began a large turn. They were entering a landing pattern. The engine became even noisier; the fuselage shook even more fiercely.

“Hold on tight, the runway’s a little bare bones. No margin for error.”

“…By runway, you don’t mean that field over there?”

“Don’t talk. You’ll bite your tongue!”

“Wah… Seriously?!”

The old propeller plane charged toward the field, with nothing but grass spread out over otherwise barren ground. It was about the same width as an elementary schoolyard; there weren’t even markers, let alone pavement. It wasn’t something you could call a runway in good conscience.

Without hesitation, Yukina pressed herself into Kojou, but he had no leeway to blush over it.

The aircraft violently touched down with roughly the same force as a crash landing. They bounced off the rough surface several times, slowly decelerated, and barely came to a stop before going over a cliff.

With a practiced hand, Kirishima undid his seat belt and opened the ill-fitting door.

“We’re here. Now get off, lovebirds. I’ve got a schedule to keep.”

“We’re not a couple, you know.”

Kojou objected, but there was no strength in his voice. Pulling the tottering Yukina by her hands, Kojou slowly made his way off the aircraft. It had been a long time since he’d set foot on solid ground, and it’d never felt so good.

“Are the Kanases really in a place like this?” Kojou asked while gazing at the sight of the empty, uninhabited island. Kirishima made a thin smile rich with implication.

“Who knows. I’m sure you’ll meet them soon enough… If you live that long, anyway.”

“…Kirishima?”

After confirming that Kojou and Yukina had moved away from the aircraft, Kirishima slammed the plane’s door shut. The airplane’s engine revved up with great force once more, sending the small plane gently running forward.

“Sorry, honeymooners. Well, blame Beatrice for this, not me, ’kay?”

With a wave through the window, those were Kirishima’s parting words. As he grasped the meaning of those words, Kojou’s facial expression froze in terror. In haste, Kojou ran after the accelerating airplane.

“H…hold up, pops!”

“Who the hell you calling pops?! I’m still twenty-eight…!”

As the airplane gradually lifted off the ground, Kirishima’s shouts grew quieter.

Kojou was beside himself as he stared at the small plane as it grew distant,

seemingly vanishing into the pale sky.

"…Gimme a break here."

The powerful tropical sunrays made the blue sea glitter.

3

It was some fifteen minutes later that Kojou roused himself from his daze.

Though the situation seemed hopeless, it might have been too soon to say that.

Though he'd held on to paper-thin hope, the airplane that had vanished over the horizon did not return; all that remained were the cruel, mocking voices of the birds around them. They'd been abandoned on a completely uninhabited island. Beatrice Basler had deceived them.

As Yukina stood still in shock near the cliff, Kojou timidly called out to her. "Er… Himeragi, are you all right?"

Yukina looked back with a pensive expression before lowering her face in dejection. She no doubt felt responsible that she hadn't seen through Beatrice and Kirishima's scheme in spite of the powerful Spirit Sight ability she rightly took pride in as a shrine maiden.

"I'm sorry, senpai. This is my mistake."

"It's nothing you need to apologize for, Himeragi. I got fooled, too, same as you."

"No, I was most careless, in spite of fully expecting that Magus Craft might be involved in the Masked incident."

"Well, not sure it's carelessness so much as…being rattled by the whole airplane thing…"

"It is not that at all! I was merely careless!"

Yukina continued to bluff her way forward even now, somehow unable to make that concession. *Well, that's fine and all*, thought Kojou as he used his parka's hood to block some of the strong sunrays.

“So this means that Beatrice is in on this with Kanase’s dad, huh…? Shit. Going to meet them without telling Natsuki completely backfired…”

Realizing his own error in judgment, Kojou could only regret it now.

Natsuki and her peers were as yet unaware of the connection between the Masked and Magus Craft Incorporated. Further delays in the investigation would only make Kanon’s position worse and worse.

He didn’t know what Kensei Kanase wanted to use his daughter’s body for, but now he’d have even more precious time to conduct his *experiment*.

“I suppose so. They really got us. I never imagined the Fourth Primogenitor could be eliminated from Itogami Island by such means.”

Yukina spoke in a tone that somehow oozed regret. She was likely in shock that Kojou, the individual she’d been assigned to watch, could be rendered completely powerless with such ease. Kojou felt a bit conflicted at her fierce competitiveness rearing its head in an odd direction as he took out his cell phone.

“…Out of range…figures. Even if I use the GPS, this island’s not gonna be on any map, is it? Useless,” Kojou grumbled, cutting the power. “I suppose we could get lucky and have a ship pass by… Probably not, huh?”

“In the first place, the passage of passenger airplanes and ships in the waters around a Demon Sanctuary is restricted by law.” Yukina calmly informed him of the unpalatable fact.

It wasn’t as if Kojou thought that Beatrice and Kirishima would have dumped them in a place where rescue was easy or likely. It was better not to expect aid to come for some time.

“We’ll have to think of how to get off this island later. First, let’s examine the island. We need to secure water first.”

“Water?”

“Yes. Food and shelter after that, preferably while we still have light.”

Yukina took her silver spear out from the guitar case on her back. It seemed she intended to use it to slice away tree branches to create a path through the

forest.

“…Feels like we’re shipwrecked sailors on a deserted island, huh?”

Kojou spoke with no tension in his voice at all. Yukina sighed and looked back at Kojo. “We don’t *feel* like it, we *really are* on a deserted island.”

“R-right… Man, if no one rescues us, worst case we might be living here together for the rest of our lives. This is like some bad joke…”

Kojou clutched his head as he looked over the tiny island, completely cut off from civilization. To a pampered modern person like Kojou, just the thought of living without convenience stores, supermarkets, the Internet, television, electricity, and running water was enough to terrify him. He was all the more frightened that while he and Yukina were left in such primitive surroundings, Kanon would be placed in even greater danger. He couldn’t even form the words to describe the worst-case scenario.

However, for some reason, Yukina had a hurt look in her eyes as she glared at Kojou.

“‘Worst case,’ you say… Being all alone with me is a bad joke…is it?”

“Huh?”

“No, it’s nothing at all.”

Turning her back to him as she spoke, Yukina headed into the forest. Her spear gouged out a tree trunk before Kojou’s eyes with what felt like indiscriminate swinging.

“Er… Himeragi? You don’t happen to be, um, upset?”

“No. I am not upset whatsoever. I am simply marking the path so that we do not become lost.”

“I-I see. Makes sense.”

As he said those words, feeling nonetheless like he couldn’t agree all that much, Kojou walked after Yukina, advancing into the forest.

It was easier to walk in the forest than he’d imagined, probably because the dense foliage of the trees obstructed sunlight, preventing grass from growing

below. Bare volcanic rock became a gently descending slope that continued down to a small inlet.

To begin with, the region around Itogami Island was a tropical zone with a large amount of rainfall. A clear stream flowed between gaps in the exposed rock, carrying water that flowed up from springs on the island. At the very least, it seemed they wouldn't have any problems getting fresh water.

"…Himeragi?"

Yukina, having continued walking without even a glance back, suddenly came to a stop just as she cleared the forest. It felt like she was conflicted as she gazed at the slope of a nearby cliff. Kojou followed her gaze, squinted his eyes, and…

"Hey, is that…a building?"

"Ah no… That's…"

Roused by Kojou's voice, Yukina looked at him, seeming a bit unsure about how to put things.

Halfway up the slope was a blackened concrete wall. The surface was cracked, with moss growing on it, but there was no doubt it was man-made.

"So what, there really is a Magus Craft research facility? Didn't expect that."

"No, there should not be… But…"

"Can't tell anything staring from here, so let's go. Who knows, maybe someone's been living on this island and Kirishima and her just don't know it."

"Senpai?! Wait, please, that's…"

As Kojou ran forward, ignoring Yukina's efforts to stop him, he drew near the building with a straight frontal approach. The back of his mind did entertain the possibility of traps set by Kirishima and them, but that was as far as the thought led.

But as he arrived close to the actual wall, he realized the reason Yukina had tried to stop him.

It was a very odd building. It was about as tall as a two-story apartment building. Though encased in thick concrete, the holes in the wall didn't even have

glass windows. Peering inside, the structure didn't have furniture, or even lightbulbs. It didn't look anything like what someone would actually live in.

"It's…a pillbox." Yukina, having caught up with Kojou, murmured as she looked up at the building.

"Pillbox?"

"A defensive structure built to obstruct the approach of enemy forces in wartime. It's like a fort."

"People fought a war even on an island like this?"

"I do not know. It doesn't seem to be an especially old structure, though."

Having said those words, Yukina stepped into the gloomy pillbox without hesitation. As Kojou followed after her, his face scowled at the feeling transferred to him through the soles of his shoes. Dimly glittering metal cylinders were scattered beneath their feet like branches fallen from a tree. They were machine-gun bullet casings.

"Signs of a firefight…it would seem."

Yukina spoke with an apparent sigh in her voice.

Looking all around, there were countless cavities and cracks apparently left by gunfire all over the pillbox's walls. So far as they could judge from the surface grime, the bullet marks weren't old. At most, they'd been made here within the last few years. However, they had no idea who had attacked this island or for what purpose. After all, they hadn't heard of any pirates operating in the seas around Itogami Island; even if there were pirates, they had no reason to bother to land on a deserted island like this and play at war.

"I do not see any corpses, either."

Looking around the interior of the desolate pillbox, Yukina murmured quietly.

Certainly, in contrast to the large number of bullet casings, there was no sign of any casualties at all. Even Kojou's enhanced vampire senses could not locate any trace of shed blood.

"Yeah, now that you mention it. Well, honestly, better for us."

“We’re lucky the roof is intact. It reduces the labor required to set up camp.”

“Wait, you don’t intend to sleep here?”

As Kojou made an appalled expression, Yukina gave him a look that seemed to ask, *Is there a problem?*

“I’m…a little scared a ghost might come out or…something…”

“…Senpai, why are you afraid of something like a ghost? You are a vampire, aren’t you?” Yukina sounded like she was about to crack up.

Kojou twisted his lips in a sulky look. “Well, even you’re scared of airplanes, Himeragi.”

“I am not! I’m not scared of them at all!”

Yukina’s face was beet red as she made her retort. Kojou sighed a bit and looked up at the roof of the pillbox.

“They sure didn’t leave us anything to work with, though. Wish they’d have at least left a radio behind.”

“…It may not be very…funny… But now that we cannot leave by our own power, we have no choice but to wait for rescue together… Even if it is…worst case.”

For some reason, Yukina returned to her sulky tone of voice as she spoke, leaning forward where she stood.

“Rescue… Rescue, huh…?”

Kojou made a soft sigh as he gazed through the machine-gun port at the horizon.

Kojou’s sigh could not reach Itogami Island, which was now far, far away.

4

“He’s L-A-T-E!”

Watching with annoyance as her smartphone failed to connect, Asagi Aiba groaned in displeasure.

She was in the living room of a certain seventh-floor apartment in Island South.

Asagi's outfit for that day was far plainer than her normal ones. However, she'd actually stretched to ensure she was dressed in brand-new street clothes from head to toe. Thanks to her hair being worn down, Asagi personally prided herself on how she looked like a young lady.

"How long is that idiot gonna keep me waiting for…!"

Next to the indignant Asagi was a blank sketchbook and a full set of painting materials. She'd taken Kojou's promise to help her with her art homework at face value, taking time out of the middle of her day off, coming all the way to greet him at the Akatsuki residence. Yet, after all that, Kojou wasn't there. Apparently he'd arrived late the night before and set off again in the early morning, all without a single word to Asagi, of course.

"…Sorry Kojou's causing trouble for you, Asagi."

Nagisa Akatsuki hung her head apologetically as she sat next to Asagi. Apparently Kojou's diligent little sister felt responsible for her absent older brother's conduct.

Asagi made her usual sarcastic expression, making a good-humored smile at Nagisa. They had, after all, gotten to know each other very well over the last four years.

"You don't need to apologize, Nagisa. It's all the fault of the idiot who promised to be here and then left. I was pretty dumb to believe him, too, though. I swear, he's just…"

"Yeah…but I really wonder where Kojou went? We can't get him on his cell phone at all, and it looks like Yukina's been gone since morning, too."

"That transfer student again…?"

Tch. Asagi clicked her tongue at Nagisa's casual murmurs. After so many similar "coincidences," even Asagi had noticed it was rather odd.

Kojou's absences had skyrocketed over the last half year or so, but it'd become especially bad after that transfer student had arrived. And without fail,

whenever he disappeared without any warning, *she* was involved. There was definitely some kind of secret between them.

Of course, had Asagi been minded to, she could have looked up Yukina Himeragi's true colors with ease. She was confident that she could dive into various public databases and instantly get ahold of everything from her date of birth to her bank statements. But Asagi was not minded to do any such thing.

It wasn't Asagi's style to pick a fight she knew in advance she was going to win. Secrets were something that should be exposed in broad daylight only after smashing through a suitable obstacle. That was why Asagi was so revered as the "Cyber Empress," the living embodiment of hacker pride.

As Nagisa poured new coffee into their cups, she spoke as if suddenly remembering something. "Ah, but if they're together, maybe they're helping out Kanon…"

"Kanon…? You mean Kanon Kanase? The platinum blonde?" Asagi was mystified as she asked back. The Saint of Middle School was quite famous. Even Asagi knew her name and what she looked like.

"A few things happened, and I told Kojou to help Kanon find a new home for a stray cat.

"The circumstances make for a bit of a long story, though…tee-hee…"

Nagisa made her usual happy smile. As the story went, Kojou had mistakenly believed a boy had confessed to his little sister, to the point of barging onto the rooftop of the middle school building.

Usually, Asagi would laugh at an older brother unable to bear to be apart from his little sister, but all she did was make a light chuckle and give Nagisa a gentle look. Even now, Asagi had never forgotten the sight of the young boy visiting his gravely injured little sister four years before.

"Taking care of a stray… Come to think of it, Kojou was asking everyone in the class if they could raise a kitten," Asagi murmured as she recalled his odd behavior from the previous day. Nagisa nodded with approval.

"Right, right. So, let's see… Ah, that means they could be at the abbey."

“Abbey?”

“Yeah. There’s ruins of an abbey behind school where Kanon used to live way back. She’d been taking care of the cat there in secret. I could take you there. How about right now? I have to go to school for club, anyway.”

Nagisa spoke while looking up at the clock on the wall. It was an hour past noon. The weather, even viewed from the inside of an apartment, was bright and sunny to a truly ridiculous degree.

“Hmm… Waiting here doesn’t suit me very much, anyway. Okay, let’s do it.”

Asagi rose to her feet, still clutching her beloved smartphone.

5

A building remained within the park that rested atop the gently sloping hill. The building was an abbey in ruins.

“Caduceus… Just like the intel file said.”

The girl let out an unimpressed murmur after confirming that the relief carved into the roof was as expected.

She was a tall, slender girl. Her skin complexion was light; her hair had a faint chestnut color to it. The elegant, refined beauty of her face was reminiscent of a flower proudly in bloom. She was Sayaka Kirasaka—Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency.

“This is the abbey Kanon Kanase lived in? Pretty place considering it’s been abandoned for years.”

Sayaka’s shapely eyebrows rose as she looked around the interior of the ruined building.

There was no sign of human presence within. The cracked walls and broken furniture were likely vestiges of the incident from five years earlier.

That incident was what triggered the shutdown of the abbey, scattering all who dwelled within to the four winds. Surely no one had lived here since that time.

But mysteriously, there was not even a whiff of dust. Apparently someone had been regularly coming through and cleaning the place. Surely this was a crucial lead relevant to Sayaka's current mission. But…

"—Achoo!"

A sudden itchy sensation made Sayaka let out a small sneeze. The cause laid in minute particles floating in the air inside the abbey in spite of the regular cleaning.

"Cat hair?"

The sound of her own sneeze echoed throughout the abbey. Feeling a faint disturbance of the air along with the reverberation, Sayaka reflexively looked behind her back.

"…Who's there?!"

Retaining her guarded posture, she stretched her hand to the instrument case on her back. Poking out of the gap in the case was the glittering silver hilt of a long sword.

"It's useless to hide from me…so would you just come out already?"

As Sayaka made her frosty warning, a faint laughing voice came out from behind a pillar. "You got me," said the voice with an echo that evoked a strained smile.

"…Hiya."

The word, spoken without a single shred of tension, came as the student wearing a school uniform poked his face out. He was a high school student with short-cut hair, spiky and combed backward, with a pair of headphones hanging from his neck.

"The same uniform as Kojou Akatsuki? You're…you were with Dimitrie Vattler during that incident…"

"Ahh, was I now? Thanks back there."

Motoki Yaze smiled tensely with a look of embarrassment.

This was not Sayaka's first encounter with him. For some reason, this student

had been at the scene of the recent terrorist incident that had rocked Itogami City; he'd watched the incident to its conclusion.

"If you ask…who I am, 'Kojou Akatsuki's classmate' is the only answer I can give you."

Yaze scratched his face with a somewhat conflicted look. Sayaka continued to glare at him.

"Meaning you have no intention of revealing who you really are?"

"Er, well, ah, please don't pry about that. We're both in a bind if we start asking questions. Like, who is a War Dancer for the Lion King Agency looking for in a place like this?"

A perplexed expression came over Sayaka as her own identity was so easily spoken of out loud. She could not hide her irritation with Yaze's know-it-all tone of voice.

"What is…your purpose here?"

"I want to make a deal with you. I'm in a bit of a bind myself, y'see." Yaze spoke with a rather meek voice.

Sayaka didn't think his behavior was an act. "A deal?"

"Yeah. And my condition for the deal is that you don't talk about me to anyone else; not to Kojou, not to Yukina Himeragi."

As Yaze made his oddly roundabout explanation, Sayaka understood.

The boy before her eyes knew that Yukina Himeragi was Kojou Akatsuki's watcher. But his position would be made quite difficult if either Yukina or Kojou became aware of that fact. In other words, *his* mission was to monitor what direction things were going in with Kojou *and* Yukina… Suddenly, it all made sense.

"If you can accept that condition, I'll provide you with information. I think it's highly valuable information from your perspective."

"…'Information'?" Sayaka coldly repeated the word back. She had no reason to make any concessions.

At her jab, Yaze slumped his shoulders and replied curtly. “The whereabouts of Kojou Akatsuki.”

“…Hah?! I-it’s not as if I have any interest whatsoever in knowing that you know…!”

Sayaka’s voice sounded shrill as she made her objection. She had no idea why he would come to her with that sort of offer. After all, what value did such information have to Sayaka…?

Seeing Sayaka so plainly agitated, Yaze made a face that said, *Whoa, land mine*.

“Apparently, right now Kojou’s off the island.”

“…The Fourth Primogenitor is outside the Demon Sanctuary?”

Sayaka’s expression hardened. It wasn’t that she completely trusted what Yaze was saying; but even if not expressly related to her mission at hand, if his story *was* true, it certainly was a matter of grave concern.

“Of course, Yukina Himeragi is together with him…”

“Uh…gh…”

“Y’see, right now it’s kinda bad if they get wrapped up in this whole business with Kanon Kan—”

Speaking in a listless tone of voice, Yaze suddenly cut off his words.

Sayaka’s look grew sharp when the name of Kanon Kanase passed through his lips. However, for some reason, Yaze seemed to be in a vortex of distress as he clutched his head.

“What’s wrong?”

Sayaka glared at Yaze with a guarded expression. Yaze was sweating bullets.

“This is bad… Correction, it’s worst case. Why did *they* come here?!”

“They?”

When Sayaka tilted her head, the warped door creaked; she sensed that someone was entering the building. The tension-filled atmosphere was shattered when a sunny, slightly lisping voice reverberated.

“Hellooo! Kanon, are you there? Did my Kojou come visit?”

The one who hopped out from behind the cracked wall was a schoolgirl small in stature.

It was Kojou Akatsuki’s little sister. Her round eyes were especially large as she looked at Yaze as he crouched down.

“Ah, Yaze?”

“Motoki? What are you doing in a place like th…?”

Following up was another girl, but her feet came to a halt when she noticed Sayaka. She was a high school student wearing refined street clothes. She was a beautiful girl with an urban air, with her whimsical, aristocratic air reminiscent of a cat.

“Aaa!!”

“Aaa!!”

Both raised their voices and pointed at the other almost simultaneously.

“You’re the serial killer who attacked Kojou not long ago?!”

“K-Kojou Akatsuki’s bimbo?!”

Both were in shock at the other’s declaration. Both raised their voices once more.

“Wh-who are you calling a bimbo?!”

“I’m not a serial killer, you know?!”

As if about to begin a cage match then and there, the two drew near each other and forcefully glared, as if willing the other to die.

Nagisa’s eyes popped wide, having no idea what was going on whatsoever.

“Er…ah, what? What’s going on?! Hey, Yaze, tell me!”

Looking over the sides of Sayaka’s and Asagi’s faces, Nagisa furiously slapped Yaze’s back as he remained bent over.

With a tired look, Yaze put his cheeks into his hands and muttered weakly, “Leave me out of this…”

6

“Kojou Akatsuki, heir to the Kaleid Blood lineage, releases thee from thy bonds…!”

Standing on a rocky area on the coast buffeted by violent waves, Kojou raised his right hand.

Where he pointed, a crimson haze of fresh blood spurt forth.

Finally, the bloody haze was replaced by a thunderbolt, emitting a golden glow along with a magical surge of incredible force. The volatile, massive electrical energy became a pillar of light that rose into the sky.

“…C’mon over, Beast Vassal Number Five, Regulus Aurum!”

A giant lion enveloped in lightning emerged above Kojou’s head. This was Regulus Aurum—one of the twelve Beast Vassals Kojou had inherited from the previous Fourth Primogenitor.

Thanks to Kojou having drunk Yukina’s compatible blood, it had recognized Kojou as its new master, enabling him to summon it in this fashion, but that didn’t mean it was easy to control. It was truly a difficult Beast Vassal to use; one small slip and it would go berserk, indiscriminately destroying everything around it.

As he paid diligent attention to detail, Kojou sent the lion toward the sea.

If Kojou failed in controlling the Beast Vassal here, it would no doubt fry a tiny island like this to a crisp in the blink of an eye and sink it into the sea. Well aware of this, he was being extremely cautious.

The lightning lion’s thick, swordlike claws calmly approached the surface of the sea. Restraining its might as much as he could manage, Kojou unleashed the Beast Vassal’s power—

That instant, the air yielded completely as massive electrical force flowed into the sea all at once.

The overwhelming energy boiled the seawater in a single moment, causing the

water to evaporate and turn into an explosion of steam. With a tremendous roar and a heavy shudder of the air, shock waves scattered about and made the ground shake.

"…No good, huh? Bwah!" Kojou exhaled in dismay, wiping off his seawater-drenched face. Then—

"What do you think you are doing, senpai?"

Behind his back, Koujo heard Yukina's low, muffled voice.

The Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency, dripping from head to toe, glared sharply at Kojou.

Transparent water droplets rolled down her face; her bare flesh could easily be seen through her damp uniform. Apparently the explosion from just then had sent a large amount of sea spray scattering about, including right on top of her head.

Kojou had been much closer to the center of the explosion, but the fact she'd suffered considerably more "damage" than he had made him feel a bit like a heel.

"Er, ah… I heard that there's a way to fish with electrical shock, so it got me thinking…"

"Therefore, you used a Beast Vassal in an attempt to collect fish?" Yukina asked while combing her drenched forelocks upward. Kojou timidly nodded.

"But it… It's not gonna work, is it?"

"Apparently not." Yukina sighed in resignation.

Kojou's Beast Vassal attack had caused substantial environmental destruction in the local area. A large amount of sand had been thrown up from the gouged-out sea bottom, muddying the boiling surface of the water. Most likely the fish that had been swimming in the area had been pulverized into smithereens. The force had been far too much.

Somehow, Kojou could understand why the Japanese government had banned fishing by electrical shock.

"So, um…what are you doing here, Himeragi?"

“Supper is ready, so I came to invite you.”

“R-right…thanks.”

As he gave Yukina his thanks, Kojou climbed up the cliff.

Yukina, who had received survival training from the Lion King Agency, had actually done a very skillful job piling stones up to build a hearth, easily lighting a fire from the dried branches she’d gathered.

She’d used dried branches in place of a table upon which to serve the meal she had prepared.

An expression of doubt came over Kojou as he looked over the cooking placed there.

“Er…what’s that?”

Kojou pointed to the relatively orthodox dishes. There were fruits encased in hard fibrous husks.

“Coconuts,” Yukina replied with a hint of triumph. *I see*, Kojou thought with a nod.

“…And that white stuff?”

“Coconut slices.”

“So that means that over there is…”

“Chopped coconut and coconut strips. And this is coconut soup with seawater.”

“That’s some…pretty creative cooking there.”

Kojou conveyed his thoughts with carefully chosen words. Since coconuts were the only ingredients she had to work with, there wasn’t any other cooking to be had; he wasn’t exactly in a position to complain. If anything, he should have been praising Yukina’s spear skills for being able to use that stupidly long Snowdrift Wolf to slice coconuts up like this.

“How does it taste?” Yukina asked hopefully as Kojou tentatively took a sip of the coconut soup.

“Mm… Suppose I have to say, it tastes like regular coconut.”

Yukina sighed.

“Come to think of it, sometimes Nagisa really wrecked my stomach when we were little kids and I went along with her playing house…”

“Why something like that comes to mind right now bothers me somewhat, but since you do not seem to be in a good mood, I will refrain from pushing the issue.” Yukina’s cheeks were puffed up as she glared at Kojou.

Kojou didn’t notice at all as he gazed at the sea, illuminated by the setting sun.

“If we’re stuck here for days on end, Nagisa’s gonna get worried. We left without saying a word, after all. Well, since it’s Sunday tomorrow, she probably won’t be all that worried y…”

Just as he was saying that, Kojou’s eyes popped wide. He’d suddenly remembered something *very* important.

“…Senpai?”

Yukina looked at Kojou in apparent concern. Kojou flopped onto his back then and there.

“Uh-oh. I promised to help Asagi with her art homework today. She’s gonna be pissed, I just know it.”

“A promise with Aiba…?” Yukina muttered in a voice that seemed stale. Then, she suddenly turned serious.

“That might be a small reason for hope.”

“…That would be nice.”

Kojou nodded as he realized what Yukina was getting at.

In the first place, Asagi would surely notice that Kojou wasn’t on Itogami Island. And knowing her personality, she wasn’t the type of person who’d just let that go. She’d chase Kojou down to the ends of the earth just to give him a piece of her mind for breaking his promise.

With her supreme hacking skills and the mainframe computer of the Gigafloat Management Corporation at her disposal, it was entirely possible she’d realize the connection between Kojou, Yukina, and Magus Craft.

“But if she isn’t careful getting too close to Magus Craft, she might put herself in danger, too… So there’s that problem. More importantly, we can’t just leave Kanase with ’em like this.”

The dilemma was how to try to save someone without putting someone else in danger as a result. It was a source of great anguish for Kojou, especially now that he was helpless to do anything about any of it.

A faint smile came over Yukina as she watched Kojou be so earnest.

“…You really worry about other people, senpai… Even though you’re on a deserted island with no way back.”

“I know. This isn’t really the time or place for worrying about other folks.”

Kojou’s lips twisted with the shame of it all. But Yukina gently shook her head, murmuring in a voice he could barely pick up. “No… I think that’s one of your… somewhat good points, senpai.”

“…Hmm?” Kojou asked back in bewilderment. She looked back at him with a teasing smile.

“It’s a lovely view, isn’t it?”

Yukina spoke as the coastal breeze toyed with her wet hair.

The rays of the setting sun beautifully highlighted the side of her still rather young face.

It seemed like a mirage. For a while, Kojou’s eyes were captivated by the scene.

“Yeah… I suppose it is.”

He nodded with a sigh mixed in. Soon, night would fall—

7

It was an Internet café on Island West. Three people were crammed into a booth meant for one, their faces pressed close, sucking in their breath as they looked at the image scrolling onto the monitor before them.

“Got it… Here. Ryogami Heavy Industries, Inc. Aerostellar RA II.”

Asagi stopped the fast-forwarding video and enlarged the frame. The image data was crude, filled with garbage. The image displayed an aircraft just prior to takeoff. It was an old propeller-type aircraft with a capacity of four.

“Corporate plane owned by Magus Craft, huh?”

Yaze boldly smiled as he looked at the corporate logo on the fuselage.

Asagi silently typed on the keyboard. The two people sitting side by side in the back of the aircraft were expanded further. One was a boy wearing a parka with a listless-looking face; the other was a girl of small stature with a guitar case.

“This is from an airport surveillance cam so the quality’s only so-so, but that’s definitely Kojou and the transfer student.”

“…Looks like it. Know where they’re going?”

“From the flight plan, they were expected to fly to a proprietary research facility, but that’s probably fake, huh…? But judging from the flight time, I don’t think it flew all that far.”

Even while engaging in conversation, Asagi continued executing programs she’d cooked up herself on the spot. Viruses granted short, transient lives now acted like familiars for a cyber-witch and began invading Magus Craft–related facilities one after another.

Asagi followed up using her Gigafloat Management Corporation server administrator rights. The support AI that was her “partner” booted up. This was Mogwai—the avatar of the five supercomputers that managed all of Itogami Island’s urban functions.

“How’s your end, Mogwai?”

“It’s coming. As expected of a major corporation, its public finances are all dolled up…”

Mogwai, in the process of invading Magus Craft Incorporated’s American headquarters, spoke with a very humanlike tone at times.

He was investigating Magus Craft’s accounting department. He’d blasted through several firewall layers and was reconstructing data that seemed to concern hidden accounts and past business dealings.

“*Heh-heh*… Fishy. This part really smells suspicious.”

“…Private land bought through subsidiaries?”

Asagi inclined her head as she looked over the map displayed on the screen.

“Why would they buy up entire uninhabited islands like this? And this is outside Demon Sanctuary jurisdiction, isn’t it?”

“The cover story is that it’s for tourists…”

“It’s less than thirty minutes one way from Itogami Island… Convenient times for round-trips by an old prop plane.”

Looking over the specs of Magus Craft’s private airplane, Asagi made a snort through her nose.

Mogwai made a cackle and a sarcastic chuckle.

“I finally found something interesting. This is their list of major customers.”

“…The Confederate States of America military? What is this, a giant order for cleaning robots?”

As she pieced together the disparate information, Asagi questioned the incongruous data before her eyes. However, she thought Mogwai was the last AI that would make such basic mistakes.

“I see. I finally get what game they’re playing…”

Yaze made a displeased-sounding murmur in place of the perplexed Asagi. He seemed to have some idea of what business Magus Craft was engaged in under the table.

“Asagi Aiba… Who are you?”

Even Sayaka, not much inclined toward information technology herself, could grasp that Asagi’s skill in handling digital information far exceeded the norm. Though she should not have been so surprised that any resident of the Demon Sanctuary was not a normal human being, but Asagi’s ability was clearly exceptional even so. She could accept that this was the girl who’d destroyed the Nalakuvera.

“You’re not just with the Gigafloat Management Corporation, you’re able to

break into Magus Craft's head office so easily, too…

"I already thought you couldn't be an average Joe for the Black Death Emperor Front to set eyes on you, but…"

As a look of wonder came over Sayaka's face, Asagi looked up in mild annoyance. She waved the issue off like it was a bother.

"Sorry, but I'm just a regular high school student. I just work for the Management Corporation part-time here and there."

"Hah? Part-time?"

This time Sayaka was in complete shock. Where information warfare was concerned, Asagi Aiba was every bit a monster as the Fourth Primogenitor. But even so, she had not yet come to realize the fact herself…

Shuddering at the danger that could pose, Sayaka spoke. "Kirasaka…is it? Well, who are you? Can you really get Kojou and Yukina rescued?"

"Leave that to me. I can use my connections to get a coast guard ship dispatched."

Sayaka nodded crisply.

Even if it was not her assigned mission, the monitoring of the Fourth Primogenitor, Kojou Akatsuki, was the Lion King Agency's top priority issue. And it was Sayaka's natural and expected duty to save his watcher, Yukina, who had been whisked away with him in the process.

Besides, it seemed that Kojou and Yukina's disappearance was not unrelated to Sayaka's own mission after all.

Using the Lion King Agency's name, Sayaka had booked an appointment with Kensei Kanase. There were things she wanted to ask him as Kanon Kanase's guardian. If Sayaka had gone to Magus Craft ahead of Yukina and Kojou, it might well have been her who'd have found herself whisked off the island instead.

"…Connections, huh?"

As could only be expected, Asagi murmured in a tone of complete distrust.

However, Sayaka could not invoke her own title here. If she revealed she was

with the Lion King Agency, she'd be exposing Yukina's identity, and Kojou Akatsuki's secret would be revealed along with it. That would probably be unpleasant for Asagi.

But fortunately, Asagi seemed to have no intention of ferreting out Sayaka's identity. Instead, she gazed right into Sayaka's eyes from the front.

"So…"

"So…"

"What's your relationship with Kojou?"

"What's your relationship with Kojou Akatsuki?"

Asagi and Sayaka glared at each other, both pairs of lips pressed tight in annoyance.

Both were putting a lot of force into it, as if the first one to look away would drop dead on the spot; the tension inside the cramped booth spiked higher. Perhaps he simply couldn't take the dense atmosphere when…

"Now, now, now…," Yaze interjected with a witty tone of voice. "We can all have a nice, peaceful talk about that when Kojou and Yukina are back safe and sound… Right now, though, that bastard and Yukina are off together on a deserted island… It might create a, well, you know, an Adam and Eve type of situation."

Yaze's irresponsible declaration gave both Asagi and Sayaka a start, their eyebrows twitching.

"…Yes. That's bad, isn't it?"

"Certainly, it is as you say, Motoki Yaze."

The two exhaled simultaneously; seeing this, Yaze sighed quietly in relief.

Sayaka stepped out of the booth with a sway of her long ponytail. Without warning, she picked up the instrument case standing against the wall.

"You've been a big help. You have my thanks, Asagi Aiba."

"You're quite welcome. More importantly, could you tell me just one last thing?"

“…Yes, if it’s something I can reply to.”

Sayaka reacted to Asagi’s provocative gaze with a nod. Beholding Sayaka’s forthright attitude, a satisfied smile came over Asagi’s face.

“Why are you looking into Kanon Kanase, Kirasaka?”

With a bit of hesitation, Sayaka told her the truth after all. “That’s… There’s someone who wants to meet her. Escorting that person is my proper assignment.”

There was virtually no doubt that Kojou and Yukina had visited Magus Craft for the purpose of meeting Kanon Kanase.

If that was the case, Asagi Aiba was not a complete bystander. She had a right to know the truth.

“…Escort?”

“Yes. But the person went missing while en route to Itogami Island.”

Sayaka gripped her instrument case, sounding mortified as she murmured.

She had disappeared before ever setting foot on Itogami Island. It wasn’t Sayaka’s fault whatsoever. However, she still cursed the fact that she hadn’t been able to protect the person she was assigned to protect.

“So the reason you came here is…”

“Because I thought looking into Kanon Kanase might give me a lead into the disappearance of my assignment. Thanks to that, now I know Magus Craft is my leading suspect.”

“I see.”

Asagi nodded, though her expression showed a lack of comprehension. Then, she immediately formed the question on her lips.

“So who is the person you’re assigned to protect, anyway?”

“That’s…”

After a moment’s hesitation, Sayaka told her.

It was a name that brought expressions of shock not only to the plugged-in

Yaze, but to the ordinary civilian Asagi as well.

8

"…Can't sleep."

Spread atop the hard palm branch bed, Kojou absentmindedly looked up at the dark sky.

He didn't know the exact time, but it probably wasn't quite eight PM yet. This wasn't a time for any modern high school student to be asleep; that went double for a nocturnal vampire.

There was no sign of Yukina in the pillbox-turned-lair. She was outside on watch duty.

Yukina had insisted that they needed to take turns keeping watch, even at night, so as not to miss any ships that might pass nearby; Kojou had not made any objection. He also imagined that both sleeping together under one roof like this might make things a bit uncomfortable. But thinking about it rationally in hindsight, he could only peg it as wasted effort.

"…Yeah, we watched all day and didn't see one ship go by, so what, one's gonna pass now?"

Kojou slowly got up as he made a languid exhale.

He realized that his throat was getting dry and thought, *I'll check up on Yukina and go drink some water*.

"Hey…Himeragi…are you awake?"

Kojou fumbled his way down the stairs and went out of the pillbox as he called Yukina's name.

However, Yukina did not answer. There was only the hollow echo of Kojou's voice in the darkness.

He couldn't see any sign of her toward the cliff, either.

Snowdrift Wolf, which she always walked around with, was missing, too.

“Himeragi…?”

Yukina’s unexpected absence struck Kojou with an instinctive loneliness.

But as he looked around, he of course knew it was possible she’d simply gone to the little girls’ room.

But Yukina’s strangely obstinate insistence that he go to sleep first while she took watch at night bothered him as he thought about it now. He felt that she was plainly up to something.

“…”

The vague unease inside Kojou’s chest grew wider still.

Yukina had said that she knew a variety of spells but that they weren’t exactly her specialty.

But that didn’t mean she was completely unable to use them. If that was the case, it might have meant she had some method of long-distance contact, like spiritual resonance or astral projection.

And if danger accompanied the employment of such spells…

Well, she’d keep quiet and do it herself so that Kojou couldn’t stop her. Given her personality, that’s exactly what she would do. If it ended up that Kojou was just overthinking it, he was cool with that. But Kojou couldn’t think of any other reason for her to be absent.

“That Himeragi…! If you’re my watcher, watch over me till the bitter end, dammit!”

As he voiced his unfocused dissatisfaction, Kojou left the pillbox behind and headed toward the forest.

The light of the young moon was unreliable; the forest interior was thick with darkness. But if anything, Kojou’s eyes brought the landscape into sharper relief than under the light of day. *To think vampire powers that are normally just a bother would be useful at a time like this*, Kojou thought ruefully.

“Where to?”

Relying on intuition alone, Kojou headed to the center of the island. Tripping

over the gnarled roots of the various trees several times, he made his way up the gentle slope when his field of vision suddenly opened wide.

There lay a spring enveloped by the trees of the forest and mist.

The water seemed to be welling up from a cavity in the rock created by a caldera. Countless stone pillars jutted out of the surface of the extremely clear water, creating a beautiful, otherworldly scene.

Suddenly, he heard a watery sound in the distance.

Kojou, shifting his gaze on reflex, sucked in his breath as he stood.

Illuminated by the moonlight, there was a woman in the spring.

For a moment, her slender, fairylike body made him mistake her for Yukina. But it was not her.

Her hair was silver; her eyes pale. Her silhouette was well removed from a Japanese person's. A beautiful girl, she looked like a goddess of the moon.

The saintly bathing woman, her body immersed in the cold water, silently stood up.

Clear droplets of water ran down, drawing supple lines over her pale flesh.

"Kanase…" Kojou murmured the word out from his lips without thinking.

The girl in the middle of the spring resembled Kanon Kanase a very great deal. But no.

This girl's aura was decidedly different than that Kanon's. She was a little taller than Kanon and her facial features more adult.

She possessed a majesty reinforced with absolute confidence, enveloping her in an overpowering aura, even while playing in the water without a stitch of clothing.

Indeed, without a stitch of clothing whatsoever…

"Wa… At a time like this! Shit… Gimme a break!"

Kojou suddenly made a low groan as he covered his own mouth.

He felt his canine teeth throb and a dry sensation in his throat. His field of

vision contracted and became tinged with red as he became filled with wild, violent desire. These were vampiric urges, the worst drawback of Kojou's physical transformation into a vampire.

The silver-haired girl lifted her face, perhaps from hearing Kojou's anguished voice.

Her pale, resolute eyes looked straight ahead at Kojou.

—Their eyes met.

A moment after Kojou had that feeling, the taste of blood swirling in his mouth brought an odd sense of relief to him.

Vampiric urges did not continue for long. The gist was, since it was love of blood and nothing more, the taste of blood made the urge vanish like it had never been there—even if the blood was his.

"…"

Kojou shook his head with annoyance as he wiped away the still-trickling blood.

His nose bled when he got aroused. It was a convenient quirk for suppressing vampiric urges, but it certainly wasn't elegant. People who didn't know the circumstances viewing Kojou at that moment would conclude he was just a clumsy pervert who had a nosebleed while peeking at a woman while she was bathing.

The silver-haired girl had already vanished. He regretted the fact he could not apologize to her.

Then, as Kojou raised his head, he suddenly felt something cool and metallic touch the nape of his neck.

"…Please do not move."

It was Yukina's voice that he heard behind him. Her voice was without inflection, reminiscent of a blade. Kojou realized that it was the tip of her silver spear that was pressed to his own carotid artery.

"H…Himeragi?!"

“I told you, please do not move. If you look back, I’ll thrust. After all, you’ll come back to life even if I kill you…,” Yukina informed him in a tone too serious to be a bluff. Kojou knew neither when she’d gotten behind him, nor why she was this angry.

“Hime…ragi? Er, what are you doing here?”

“That’s my line. I thought I asked you to sleep ahead of me, senpai.”

Yukina sighed as she reflected the question back at him. He sensed that the slightest sway of her hair sent water droplets tumbling down. *Why is she dripping wet?* Kojou thought, wrapped in suspicion.

“Er, I tried to sleep, but…when I came to, you weren’t there, so I got worried…”

“So you came to peek, then?”

“N…no!”

“I-I really will be angry if you turn around right now!”

Kojou felt the pressure of the blade increase against his neck as Yukina spoke with a flustered tone. He pondered as to the reason her hair might be wet and why she’d be so unsettled. *Come to think of it, getting that seawater in her hair seemed to really bother her*, he recalled.

“Wa… Um, Himeragi, does that mean you were taking a bath, too…?”

As Kojou timidly asked the question, Yukina’s hands, gripping her spear, twitched and trembled.

The nighttime mist around the spring had been heavy, and the stone pillars and boulders jutting out of the water created numerous blind spots. It would have been very easy for Kojou to have missed the sight of Yukina bathing.

“If that’s what it was, you could’ve told me in the first pl—”

“Since it’s you, I thought if I told you that, you would come to peek. Just like you actually did.”

Yukina spoke in a tone full of confidence. “The heck,” went Kojou, quite naturally offended. There’s no way I’d come to peek on someone like you!”

"…*Someone like me*…is it? Is that so?"

Yukina spoke in a very frigid voice. Kojou no longer had the slightest idea what the girl was angry about. Yukina sighed a silent *goodness*, and then, as if suddenly getting a bad feeling… "…So who was it that you peeked on, senpai?"

"I was saying, there was a girl who looked like Kanase right there… Wait, it's not like I peeked on her! We just happened to meet eyes, that's it!"

Yukina sighed as she gently let Kojou's rebuttal slide.

"Kanase, you say?"

"Well, she was bigger than Kanase, though… Ah, er, by bigger, I mean… development-wise… I don't mean like *that*, I mean, you know, age…"

Kojou felt Yukina's cold gaze on him as he struggled to begin some kind of excuse.

"A grown-up Kanase, is it? Bigger…?"

"Er, I'm just telling it like it is, you don't need to get all upset…"

"I'm not particularly upset."

Yukina pressed and ground the spear against him as she spoke in a voice very much full of anger.

"R-right."

"So, where is this lady right now?"

"Ah, er, she was here until right before you got here, but…"

As Kojou spoke, he shifted his gaze to the opposite wall of the spring. But all that stood there was the calm, mirrorlike surface of the pool.

"…seems she's gone."

"So it would seem."

Yukina spoke in a calm voice.

Kojou groaned as he stared at the mist-enveloped spring. There was no trace whatsoever of anyone having ever been there. Kojou felt like even he should start wondering if it had only been an illusion.

“Senpai… Can I borrow that parka from you?”

“Ahh, I don’t really mind, but…”

Thus speaking, Kojou handed the parka he wore behind him to Yukina. He sensed the faint sounds of clothes rustling and fasteners snapping.

“You can turn this way now.”

The weight of the spear upon the back of Kojou’s neck finally vanished.

The sudden sense of relief drained Kojou’s strength as he looked back. With the dark nighttime forest as her backdrop, Yukina gripped her spear as she stood in the moonlight. Her supple, bare legs stretched down from the hem of the white, baggy parka. It seemed that she really wasn’t wearing anything at all under the parka.

Kojou was unintentionally staring when Yukina thrust the spear toward him once more.

“P-please do not stare. My uniform is not dry yet, so it cannot be helped. It’s all because you drenched me with seawater, senpai…”

“Y-yeah. I’m really sorry about that.”

Seeing Kojou earnestly apologize, Yukina replied, “It’s fine now,” and made a sigh.

Then, still barefoot, she began to walk along the edge of the spring.

“Himeragi?”

“There is a trail suggesting someone passed here. Let’s follow.”

“You believe what I said earlier?” Kojou asked in a bit of surprise. Yukina looked back at him, seeming surprised Kojou would think otherwise.

“Even if it cannot be helped that you’d peek because it is your nature, senpai, I do trust you are not someone who’d make up such a meaningless lie…”

“I-I see…”

An expression of displeasure came over Kojou, not having any idea whether that meant Yukina trusted him or not.

The complexity of the terrain made it feel farther, but it hadn't been a large spring to begin with. Kojou and Yukina arrived right away at the place he'd seen the silver-haired girl.

Just as Yukina had said, there was a path leading from under the shade of some boulders all the way to the back side of the island. At the other end of the long downward slope spread forth the dark nighttime ocean.

Just as Kojou and Yukina moved to walk down the hill path, they suddenly stopped. They noticed a powerful-sounding rumble from the coast.

"That sound…"

As Kojou climbed up the nearest boulder, his eyes froze. His view was poor, obstructed by the branches of dense, overgrown trees. But he could see something on the surface of the water, immersed in the dark of night, kicking up white spray as it advanced.

"A boat?! Someone came to rescue us…?!"

"Please wait, senpai. That's…!"

Yukina moved to check Kojou as he seemed ready to rush off, anticipating the arrival of a rescue party.

As the craft drew nearer, Kojou realized why Yukina had stopped him.

It was clear from the approaching craft's silhouette that something wasn't right.

There was the strange sound and heavy water spray and how the black hull seemed to melt into the darkness. A skirtlike air cushion made the craft float on the surface of the water; a large fan mounted on the rear made it move with unbelievable speed. As it came toward the island, paying the reef no concern whatsoever, Kojou realized he'd seen a craft of this type in a war movie.

It was an amphibious hovercraft used to land marines on enemy shores.

"Magus Craft…!" Yukina murmured as she noticed the corporate logo emblazoned on the containers it carried.

Multiple searchlights mounted upon the deck converged on a single spot.

The beam of light, bright enough to blind the eyes, slowly swept across the deserted island, driving away the night. It moved with the persistence of a hunter searching for big game.

Finally, the light, bright enough to dazzle night-adjusted eyes, illuminated the forest Kojou and Yukina were hiding in.

“Senpai!”

In response to Yukina’s scolding voice, Kojou hastily got down into the grass.

“Did they…spot us?”

The searchlight, having passed over them already, returned once more.

New searchlights came on one after another, enveloping the forest in light as bright as the midday sun.

As it came ashore, the landing party gate opened.

Soldiers wearing suits of black armor over their entire bodies disembarked. Realizing in shock that their hands were gripping large-caliber military rifles, Kojou and Yukina’s eyes met.

9

“What’s a Magus Craft unit doing here *now*?! They weren’t happy with just leaving us to rot?!”

Kojou cursed his ill fortune as they fled deeper into the woods.

Since inheriting the power of the Fourth Primogenitor, Kojou had gotten wrapped up into different kinds of trouble, but being attacked by an armed platoon was a first for him. It was the type of experience he’d had rather gone through life without.

“Get down!”

Yukina thrust Kojou forward and leaped on top of him.

As Kojou and Yukina became entangled and fell forward, a hail of machine-gun bullets sailed over their heads. The air cried out as the bullets ripped through it,

making slivers of the trees they passed through fall like rain.

The thin parka conveyed the feel of Yukina's softness, but Kojou had no time to take notice. Both of them rolled among the large tree roots side by side.

"Not even a warning?! They just shot out of the blue…!"

"Live rounds, too…meaning, they have no intention of leaving either of us alive."

The expression on Yukina's face changed as she regripped her spear.

Even though they were clad in thick, full-plate armor, the Magus Craft soldiers moved swiftly.

They were quickly catching up with Yukina and Kojou despite the uncertain footing in the forest.

Judging that they would not be able to shake their pursuers off, Yukina turned decisively.

"Senpai, please hold on for fifteen seconds."

Leaving those words behind for Kojou, she suddenly ran upon the ground, leaping into the dimly lit forest.

"Himeragi?! Whoa?!"

Perhaps detecting his location because of Yukina's running off, bullet strikes grouped closer to where Kojou was hiding. A cloud of dust floated into the air, with sparks thrown off where bullets struck nearby boulders. Kojou couldn't give Yukina any support; he couldn't even lift his head up.

But the silver-colored light that twinkled from her made the gunfire, which he was starting to think would last forever, disappear.

"…Thunderclap!"

Yukina, swooping down from the treetops like a bird of prey, sent one of the armor-clad soldiers flying with a barefoot kick to the back of the head. Even the protection of thick armor did not alter in any way what the cervical vertebrae could bear, especially against a spell-enhanced blunt attack from Yukina that was capable of destroying the interior of a human body even through armor.

Her kick, which could fell even a stout beast man with one blow, easily sent the soldier flying. Furthermore, Yukina flashed her spear out before touching the ground. She severed the soldiers' rifles in two, using the butt of her spear to beat them down. It had all happened in an instant; Kojou hadn't even had time to blink.

"You okay, Himeragi?!" Finally freed from the concentrated gunfire, Kojou ran over to Yukina and the four fallen soldiers.

But Yukina leaped back with a look of shock on her face. "Senpai, it's not over yet!"

"…Eh?!"

A soldier clad in black full-plate armor rose up before Kojou's eyes. Its neck, broken by Yukina's kick, remained at an impossibly bent angle. Even so, it showed no sign of registering pain.

"Grounded Lightning!" Yukina slammed an elbow strike into the flank of another soldier rising in the same fashion.

It was a blunt attack directly at a gap in the armor. The soldier's flank collapsed, with its body bending sharply.

The blow should certainly have broken a number of ribs and inflicted damage to the internal organs. In spite of that, the soldier did not collapse. It grabbed Yukina's legs and proceeded to hoist her upside down.

"Eeek?!"

Holding down the parka as best she could, Yukina whirled her spear and smashed the soldier in the chest with it. Like a cat, she spun around and landed without a sound. Then…

"Daaaa—!"

Kojou sent both of them flying with his fist. It was a brute force blow making use of all his vampiric strength. The soldiers easily went flying, crashing into the boulders behind them. But…

"…You're kidding?! I wasn't holding back!!"

Even with their full-plate armor warped and twisted, the soldiers calmly rose

back up. This time it was Kojou's face that turned pale.

He didn't sense any magical energy from them. They didn't seem to be beast men, vampires, or some kind of sorcery-created zombies. But this inhuman damage resistance and combat power…

Given that Magus Craft had sent them, he'd been on his guard, but these were even more difficult enemies than he'd expected.

Furthermore…

"Guo—?!"

"Senpai?!"

Kojou sustained gunfire from behind and fell down on the spot. The bullet had merely grazed the tip of his shoulder. To a vampire with high-regenerative capabilities, it was no more than a scratch, but pain was still pain, immortal or not.

"I'm sorry, senpai… We're surrounded."

Returning seemingly to cover the wounded Kojou, a grave expression came over Yukina as she murmured.

Kojou felt desperation as he sensed the echoes of footsteps from all sides. Other soldiers had apparently surrounded Yukina and Kojou while they'd been struggling with the first ones they'd encountered.

Of course, if Kojou released his Beast Vassals, even thousands of gun-wielding troops were no threat. Kojou's Beast Vassals could wipe them from the face of the earth in an instant.

But Kojou's Beast Vassals didn't know the meaning of restraint. Holding back its strength *a little bit* was meaningless. The overpowered Beast Vassals were identical to bombs; they would destroy the area they were summoned to without discriminating between friend and foe. The destructiveness of the Fourth Primogenitor's Beast Vassals was not something to be directed at human opponents.

Even if his enemies were gun-toting troops, Kojou couldn't do that unless he was prepared to massacre all of them—

“What should I do?” went Kojou as he hesitated.

The next moment.

“…?!”

With a thunderous roar, a ray of light came flying, impaling the black-armored troops right before Kojou’s and Yukina’s eyes.

A second ray of light came flying, likewise cutting down the soldiers surrounding them all at once.

The beams were actually gunshots. Two bullets fired, and the tenacious soldiers surrounding them had been destroyed, saving Kojou and Yukina from their predicament.

“Are both of you safe?”

From atop a nearby boulder, they heard a voice completely devoid of any sense of tension.

Calmly standing there was a beautiful silver-haired woman. It was the girl who Kojou had seen at the spring, the one whose face resembled that of Kanon Kanase.

She did not look like a soldier, but she wore a blazer that resembled a military dress uniform and laced boots. Her arms held within them an oversized, beautifully decorated pistol resembling a brass musical instrument.

She fired a gold cartridge from the single-shot pistol at the soldiers pursuing her without any hint of indecision. The barrel let loose an incredible beam of light, blowing the black-armored troops away.

“A spell gun…?!” Yukina cried out in shock as she realized the true nature of the pistol.

“Come here while you have the chance. Quickly.”

The silver-haired girl made an elegant smile as she beckoned both of them with her hand.

Kojou and Yukina nodded to each other and approached the silver-haired girl. Her shooting the soldiers without hesitation made Kojou disinclined to trust her,

but they had no other option.

“Who are…?”

“I am La Folia Rihavein. So we meet again, Kojou Akatsuki.” The silver-haired girl made an elegant smile as she replied to Kojou’s half-posed question.

“How do you know my name?”

“You are Kojou Akatsuki, are you not? The Fourth Primogenitor who appeared in Japan?”

Looking at the surprised Kojou, the girl calling herself La Folia blinked curiously as she reflected his question back at him.

“Yeah… I am, but…”

“That was my last round.”

La Folia ignored the bewildered Kojou as she forced the conversation forward.

It felt less like she was disinclined to hear Kojou out so much as that she appeared to feel that dominating the conversation was simply the natural order of things. Thanks to that, she came off as higher-handed than her tone suggested on its own.

Given her elegant, aristocratic clothing and gleaming, golden pistol, she’d probably been raised as a lady. *She’s acting like a princess*, Kojou thought in mild amazement.

“And they are?”

“Magus Craft Automata, likely here to pursue me.”

“Automata? I see, that means…”

Kojou remembered how the soldiers shot by the spell gun had burst in a shower of metallic components. He could understand how machine soldiers could keep moving even after having their ribs smashed and their necks broken.

“That craft is unmanned. Surely your Beast Vassals can sink it, Kojou Akatsuki?” La Folia asked him as she pointed to the landing craft that remained on standby atop the coast.

“If I sink that boat, that means we can’t leave the island, either, doesn’t it?”

La Folia calmly answered Kojou’s doubts. “Even if we took the boat over, it cannot be operated except by remote control from its mothership. The greater danger is from the Automata still aboard the craft.”

He didn’t think she was lying, for the look on her face was full of aristocratic pride that left no room whatsoever for fraud or deceit.

“Senpai, they’re coming.”

Yukina gave her warning close to Kojou’s ear. He could see a new mass of

troops in the direction she was pointing her spear in.

Geez, thought Kojou, tilting his head as he exposed himself right in front of the soldiers.

Kojou walked forward completely unguarded as the soldiers opened fire.

However, the bullets never reached him, for his magic power trickled out, turning into pale lightning that enveloped Kojou's entire body; the bullets simply bounced off.

"Sorry, but this is how it's gonna be."

That said, Kojou thrust out his right arm.

Even knowing his opponents were mere machines, he didn't feel good about destroying anything with a human shape. But now that they'd fired first, he largely set that aside.

"…C'mon over, Regulus Aurum!"

A surge of enormous magical energy gushed out of Kojou's arm. This turned into raging lightning, which then took the form of an enormous lion. Easily the size of a tank, it roared and mowed down the black-armored troops.

Before the Beast Vassal of a Primogenitor said to rival natural disasters, the stoutness of the full-plate protected Automata was meaningless.

Each blow from Regulus Aurum, itself a mass of explosive electrical energy, created a giant, super-high temperature shock wave, or alternatively, assailed them with lethal electromagnetic waves.

Unsatisfied with merely laying waste to the soldiers pursuing them, the lightning lion became a purple flash and moved to the coastline. It destroyed the moored craft, not leaving a single trace, and roared to the heavens.

Beholding his own Beast Vassal, Kojou clutched his own head in dismay.

It wasn't just the Automata that had been destroyed. Along a line several hundred meters long, the beautiful forest had been burned to a crisp, the earth gouged, the very face of the terrain altered. Such were the vestiges left by Kojou's Beast Vassal run rampant. It was like this even with Kojou having tried to restrain the damage as much as he could.

Beholding the might of the Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor, even Yukina was frozen in place, eyes wide.

The only one wearing a satisfied smile was La Folia.

“Splendid, Kojou Akatsuki. That was Regulus Aurum… Avrora Florestina’s fifth Beast Vassal, was it not?”

“Who are you…?”

Making a long sigh, Kojou stared straight at La Folia.

Yes. He should have made certain sooner.

For her to know not only Kojou’s true nature, but also the name of the previous Fourth Primogenitor, she was no ordinary little rich girl. On top of that, Magus Craft was after her.

La Folia calmly looked back at Kojou.

Her eyes were blue, like a glacier. The same color as Kanon Kanase’s eyes.

“As I said, I am La Folia Rihavein.”

She spoke with an expression full of majesty.

Yukina gasped as she looked La Folia over. It seemed she had some idea what the silver-haired girl really was.

Giving a mischievous look back at Yukina, La Folia smiled. It was a smiling face that suited her age.

“I am La Folia, oldest daughter of Lucas Rihavein, of the kingdom of Aldegia of Northern Europe. I thus bear the title of princess of Aldegia.”

Gently taking hold of the hem of her short skirt, La Folia elegantly curtsied.

Kojou could only gape at the girl who had declared herself princess.

Chapter Four
Faux-Angel

CHAPTER FOUR

FAUX-ANGEL

1

The girl slept within the light.

Faintly aware, her ears heard the ceaseless reverberations of spell chants that sounded like solemn music. Beautiful light merged with a flood of sound. The light was being emitted by the complex magical symbols imprinted upon her flesh; the sound of singing came from her very own throat.

Her hideous, mismatched wings remained spread as Kanon Kanase dreamed within the light.

She knew that she was changing into something else, something not human.

She understood, without anyone having to tell her, that by the time the change was fully realized, the being known as Kanon Kanase would vanish from the world.

She did not feel frightened or sad about that. It was simply the way it was. She could do naught but obey the mechanisms of the world determined by God himself.

The remnants of her consciousness contained a faint reassurance.

The small lives she had saved; the memories of their warmth upon her cheek.

Perhaps she was obstinate and tenacious to that degree toward the kittens abandoned by their heartless owners because she saw herself, unaware of her own parents, in their tiny forms. Perhaps she had subconsciously yearned to leave behind some mark upon the world, some proof she had existed, before she vanished entirely—

Either way, her wish had been fulfilled. Even if no one would remember the girl named Kanon Kanase, no doubt the cats whose lives she had saved would live on.

Therefore, she had no regrets. Not even that her accursed arms, stained by the blood of her comrades, would never again have the opportunity to carry them…

Just before she fell completely asleep, Kanon suddenly remembered.

She remembered the name of the boy, the last one who had called out her name while she had still been human.

She remembered the glimmer of his scarlet eyes. She remembered the vast demonic energy of the familiars he wielded. She remembered how, even so, he had shouted in concern for her as she moved to tear out her comrade's throat…

She remembered the look on his face when he was awkwardly holding that kitten.

Yes… She was certain that was…Nagisa's…

"Big brother…"

Kanon's consciousness dissolved into the light.

As she continued to sleep, a single tear rolled down her cheek.

2

The ship was anchored at sea about twenty kilometers from Itogami Island.

The ship had originally been a freighter for shipping factory-manufactured robots, but its enormous cargo hold now contained only a single landing craft and several dozen Automata. The aging vessel's original duties now finished, it was currently on loan for the sake of Kensei Kanase's research.

"Whew, I feel like lead… These clothes, they're too stiff. And hot…"

Beatrice Basler made her way down the rusting stairway with a listless gait. She was fresh from having personally driven a ferryboat from Itogami Island to the ship.

Stripping off her nicely tailored jacket, Beatrice unbuttoned her blouse from the top down. Reaching a state seemingly designed to flaunt her ample bosom, she untied her hair with ease. She dropped her pretense of being an intellectual chief of research and development, displaying her true and far more aggressive personality.

She removed the bracelet, which was no longer transmitting, and opened a thick metallic door. The freighter had been overhauled to install this concealed section. It was the door to the lab Kensei Kanase was using to conduct his sorcerous ritual.

“A dreary ship as always. The food’s bad, too. How can you stay caged up like this?”

Beatrice spoke with little affection in her voice as she looked over the laboratory Kensei Kanase called “the Altar.”

It was a cramped chamber packed with seemingly limitless medical devices. It resembled an intensive care unit at a major hospital as well as a lab for handling dangerous pathogens. Or perhaps more like a solemn temple for revering a god…

Any way you sliced it, it was far from a place that the demonic Beatrice liked or felt comfortable in.

A man standing in the middle of the room replied to Beatrice’s question. “It’s an illegal experiment. It cannot be helped.”

He was a man with an austere face with white mixed into his hair. He looked like he was just short of fifty years old. Though not of any great bulk, the man had an oddly overbearing presence. From his appearance, one might mistake him for a pious clergyman.

But he was neither monk, nor a minister. If anything, he was a man whose beliefs were the polar opposite of theirs. This was a man who sought to master alchemy and sorcery to reshape the world using miracles wrought by his own hand.

In other words, this was Kensei Kanase…sorcerous engineer.

“Though I expected it, the level of miasma generated by activating a Faux-Angel above Fifth Stage is too great. Even in a Demon Sanctuary, the release of

miasma on that scale would bring the Island Guard knocking on our door with a warrant.”

Kensei spoke without showing any sign of tiring of gazing through the window before him.

A solitary girl slept on the other side of the multipaned, heavily reinforced glass.

It had bone-white walls with a marble floor with passages from scripture engraved into it. There were seven beds placed in it, all surrounded by electronic devices for medical purposes, but there was only the one sleeping girl. Now, she was the only one left.

“…So, how is our would-be angel doing?” Beatrice asked with a tone of indifference.

Kensei responded without looking back. “It’s going steadily. The pathways of the foreign spiritual nodes she absorbed have stabilized. A bit of damage remains from the combat, but that too shall surely be healed by tonight.”

“I heard that the mask was destroyed in combat.”

Staring at the girl who continued to sleep, Beatrice tapered her lips.

Normally, the girl’s beautiful face would be hidden under a metallic mask.

“Minimal effects. It isn’t a problem. I expected that the blinker would become ineffective once she arrives at Stage Seven in the first place.”

“Ah, really. If that’s so, how do you plan on controlling that monster?”

As Kensei turned back, a faint, seemingly derisive smile came over him.

“Corrupted as she may be, this is still a servant of God. A Faux-Angel reaching this stage is no different from a natural disaster once she is first unleashed. I never imagined controlling her as a tool.”

“…News to me.” Beatrice’s thin eyebrows rose.

To his sponsor, Magus Craft, what Kensei Kanase was attempting to create was mere merchandise. A tool that could not be controlled had no sale value whatsoever.

“There’s no need for concern. Think of them as a type of bomb. An awakened Faux-Angel battles her foes out of instinct, and once her duty is finished, she ascends to heaven…in a literal sense.”

“Ah…is that it…? Well, I suppose it can be sold like that…?”

Murmuring as she rudely flicked her hair up high, Beatrice turned her eyes to the girl on the bed once more.

She was a silver-haired girl with hideous, uneven wings. She used to be known by the name Kanon Kanase.

“So in the end, it was your ‘daughter’ who survived? Thoughts?”

“I expected it from the very beginning,” Kensei said bluntly in a dry, casual tone.

“Nothing went against my expectations. She was simply better.”

“That’s the royal bloodline for you, even if she is a bastard daughter.”

Beatrice laughed with a look of scorn.

Though no expression formed on his face, a glint like cold anger formed in his eyes.

“…Surely you did not come here for such trifling conversation, BB?”

“Of course not,” went BB—Beatrice Basler—as she made a great shrug of her shoulders. “We’ve secured the Fourth Primogenitor.”

“The World’s Mightiest Vampire, yes? So it was indeed a Primogenitor who interfered with the previous *ceremony*…”

“He has a Sword Shaman from the Lion King Agency watching him, after all… Whether he’s the real Fourth Primogenitor or not, we couldn’t ask for a better opponent for displaying our new product. The people at the company will be overjoyed…”

Beatrice’s voice was lively as she spoke. After a long moment of contemplation, Kensei solemnly replied with a question.

“Where is the Fourth Primogenitor?”

“The Goldfish Bowl. You know it, don’t you—the Automata live fire exercise

site? You can go ahead and sink the whole island.”

“Very well. I could not ask for a finer catalyst for the final evolution.” Kensei nodded solemnly as he replied. Beatrice smiled elegantly and turned on her heels.

“It’s settled. I’ll tell the captain to get the ship moving…”

That moment, a small device rang out from Beatrice’s chest. Her corporate pager was receiving a text. It took only one glance at the message displayed on the LCD screen for Beatrice to make an unamused snort.

“What is it?”

“It’s from Kirishima. He seems to have found what he was looking for. That Aldegian sow apparently washed up at the Goldfish Bowl… Well, it’s what I expected given the location.”

“Princess La Folia… So she is still alive. A lucky girl… No, perhaps it has only needlessly prolonged her suffering from her perspective.”

Murmuring in a tone rich with implication, Kensei made a sigh as if pitying the princess. Beatrice narrowed her eyes in a cruel look as she stuffed the folded pager back into a tight-looking pocket on the chest of her blouse.

“Now we’ll use XDA-7 to crush them without mercy, yes?”

“Yes…”

Kensei made a solemn nod as he gazed expressionlessly at the still-sleeping Kanon.

“Yes… I suppose we will…”

3

The lifepod La Folia had been aboard had washed up on the coast on the west side of the island. It was on the ocean side from Itogami Island’s perspective. It was right on the opposite side of the pillbox Kojou and Yukina had been in, with the spring right in the middle between them.

“So you really are a princess…”

Kojou murmured with deep, earnest emotion as he looked at the lifepod left on the beach.

“Why would I need to lie?”

La Folia inclined her head as she beheld the confused Kojou.

Her lifepod, outfitted for a queen, was frighteningly lavish in construction. The egg-shaped hull was surrounded by a plastic shell and an automatic rubber flotation device. In size and shape, it was broadly consistent with Kojou’s mental idea of what a lifepod should look like. But…

The exterior was a gray metallic color. No rust. No corrosion. Perhaps that had kept it highly conductive and thus resistant to lightning strikes.

The pod was lined with genuine leather and, in spite of the narrow space, was outfitted with a fine bed; though it of course had food and water, its comforts even included a lavatory with hot water.

Any way you look at it, there’s no way someone in a lifepod like this isn’t royalty, Kojou thought. He could even accept how La Folia still had impeccable hygiene in spite of having been adrift for several days.

“So what should I call you, anyway? Is ‘Your Highness’ all right?”

“Call me La Folia, Kojou. I’m sick and tired of hearing ‘Your Excellency,’ ‘Your Highness,’ and ‘Your Majesty.’ I would at least like friends from another country to call me by something less stiff and formal. That goes for you, too, Yukina.”

“Eh? No, I mean, but…”

Yukina shook her head in apparent surprise. Being technically a member of a government agency, she was of course resisting cozying up like that. But seeing Yukina reacting like that…

“Yes… We could use a pet name.”

“Mhmm,” La Folia nodded, a serious look on her face. Then, the princess made a proud smile.

“How about a Japanese-style one… Yes, you can call me Foli-rin. *Hee-hee*, I’ll have— You know, I’m actually well versed in Japanese culture.”

“…No, if I may be so presumptuous, I shall address you by your name, La Folia.”

Yukina spoke with a tone of surrender. She surely sensed that at this rate, they truly were in danger of addressing her by some silly nickname. Certainly she was fluent in Japanese, but at the very least that nickname wasn’t Japanese-style at all.

Incidentally, Yukina retrieved her drying uniform and immediately changed into it. As squalls were frequent in the area, Saikai Academy used quick-drying fabrics for its school uniforms.

“So what are you doing in a place like this, anyway?” Kojou asked as he finally felt pangs of hunger. It had to be close to dawn, but naturally, he didn’t feel much like sleeping so soon after being shot at.

“My ship was shot down while I was on my way to visit Itogami City.”

La Folia spoke as if it was no great thing. It was Kojou and Yukina who expressed surprise.

“Shot down…?!”

“By Magus Craft, perhaps…?”

Kojou and Yukina both asked questions.

“That is correct, likely for the purpose of taking me captive.”

As if lamenting the sacrifice of her subordinates, La Folia lowered her eyes a little as she nodded.

The armored airship she had been flying aboard had been shot down six days earlier. It was right on the same night of the Masked incidents beginning on Itogami Island.

That day, La Folia and the knight company escorting her set forth for Itogami Island on a royal armored airship. Then, just as they flew over nearby waters, they were suddenly attacked: an ambush in the dead of night, a thousand meters above sea level.

With the knight company having lost the initiative and most of its fighting strength, her retainers judged the situation lost and stuffed La Folia into a

lifepod. She was given no time to resist; the launched pod then fell into the sea.

La Folia had apparently drifted in the ocean for about two days before washing up on this deserted island.

“…Were those Magus Craft people trying to make ransom demands or something?”

Kojou harbored obvious doubts as he asked her. He couldn’t think of any other reason for demons in the employ of the human corporation Magus Craft to shoot down a ship belonging to some country’s royal family.

However, La Folia quietly shook her head.

“They are after my body…of the Aldegian royal bloodline.”

“…Bloodline?”

“Yes. Girls born to the Aldegian royal family are, with virtually no exceptions, powerful spiritual mediums.”

“Spiritual mediums…like shrine maidens?” Kojou glanced at Yukina as he said the words.

Yukina, discovered by the Lion King Agency, was no doubt a powerful spiritual medium as well. Indeed, with a front row seat, Kojou was well aware of the strength of her Spirit Sight and divine possession abilities. But even Yukina hadn’t had someone show up to try and snatch her. That being the case, Kojou couldn’t even fathom how great La Folia’s ability as a spiritual medium had to be.

La Folia continued, seemingly in response to Kojou’s doubts.

“…Kensei Kanase, who is employed by Magus Craft, was once the court sorcerous engineer at the Aldegian royal palace. Many of the magical secrets known to him require the spiritual strength of the Aldegian royal family. That is no doubt why they underwent the risk of attempting to capture me.”

“Kensei Kanase… You mean Kanon Kanase’s father?”

Kojou drew in his breath at the unexpected mention of his name.

La Folia looked back at Kojou, her expression never wavering.

“That man is not Kanon Kanase’s real father.”

“I know that. Kanase told us she lived in an abbey when she was little, after all.”

Kojou made a heavy sigh and turned squarely toward the princess. He glared straight into her pale blue eyes.

“…What’s your relationship to Kanon Kanase? Why do you look so much alike?”

“We look alike, you say? I have heard that Japanese people have difficulty distinguishing between foreign faces.”

La Folia blinked her eyes as she replied with a question. She didn’t really look like she was dodging the issue on purpose.

“This ain’t no passing resemblance! You look *way* too close to each other!” Kojou shouted without trying to as he drew close to the princess.

La Folia gazed at Kojou in silence. Rather than trying to hide something, it was a silence one made while hesitating to speak to another about a secret of grave import.

“Kanon Kanase’s father…is my grandfather.”

“…Grandfather? Your granddad?”

Kojou parroted the word back to her while unable to fully grasp its meaning. *La Folia’s granddad, meaning, what, the last king of Aldegia?*

“Kanon Kanase is a child my grandfather had with a Japanese woman living in Aldegia fifteen years ago.”

“…Huh?”

“Of course, this meant he was unfaithful to my grandmother…who reigned as queen at the time. Kanon Kanase’s mother returned to Japan right after giving birth to not cause my grandfather difficulties. Learning this after the fact, my grandfather built for her…”

“…The abbey Kanase was raised in…you mean?”

Yukina finished La Folia’s sentence. Perhaps she’d sensed it was something like

that from the moment she'd encountered the foreign princess who greatly resembled Kanon.

Kojou thought back to the abbey standing in a deserted corner of the park.

La Folia had said the abbey had been built for the benefit of Kanon's mother.

If that was so, her mother had to have lived there with her.

In other words, Kanon might well have been living with her biological mother. Even if she'd never declared herself such, Kanon's mother might have been watching over her daughter from nearby…but…

"Wait a minute. Your grandfather's the last king of Aldegia, right?! If he's her father, then Kanon Kanase's…"

"It would make her my aunt, yes."

All La Folia's answer did was plunge Kojou into deeper confusion. Based on appearance, the princess was probably seventeen or eighteen years old. She was clearly older than Kanon. But from Kanon's perspective, La Folia was apparently her niece. At any rate, the two were quite close blood relatives. In other words…

"She possesses no right of succession, but she is most certainly a member of the royal family."

"R-royal family…?"

"Several days ago, a minister and trusted confidante learned of Kanon Kanase's existence from my grandfather's will. My grandfather fled and my grandmother flew into a ram… Ahem, the royal court is in a slight state of uproar. However, we cannot simply let the matter of Kanon be."

The princess made what was for her a rare, frail-sounding sigh.

Kojou silently gazed up at the before dawn sky. Kanon was the daughter of a king of a foreign country. The scale of it was so huge that it didn't feel real to him. That was why he felt oddly calm.

"So that's why you were heading to Itogami City?"

"Yes. I had planned to welcome Kanon Kanase to the family in place of my grandfather."

La Folia made a casual nod. Kojou remembered the phone call from a few nights before.

“Come to think of it, Kirasaka mentioned some kind of trouble with a VIP from Aldegia. Guess she meant you?”

“Sayaka Kirasaka of the Lion King Agency, yes? Your mistress?”

La Folia looked at Kojou with a look that straddled the line between inquisitiveness and mischievousness.

“…Mistress?”

“I heard that she is one of the lovers of the Fourth Primogenitor and that your relationship is one of intense, obscene passion.”

“Gwuh!” went Kojou, ferociously clearing his throat. From beside him, he could feel Yukina’s frigid gaze pricking his skin.

“…Like hell she is! Who’s spreading an irresponsible rumor like that?!”

“Dimitrie Vattler, a nobleman of the Warlord’s Empire.”

The princess readily divulged her source, though it was not a name he’d expected to hear.

“Aaah, why that…! And how the hell do you know him, anyway?!”

“Diplomatic relations. Aldegia shares a national border with part of his territory.”

“Ugh…”

Kojou couldn’t even say a word. Now that she mentions it, that frivolous, annoying combat maniac is a— He realized that the names of the two lands—the kingdom of Aldegia and the duchy of Aldeal of the Warlord’s Empire—were a bit similar, too.

“You said that the spells Kensei Kanase employs require the power of the Aldegian royal family?” Yukina asked in place of Kojou, who had not yet recovered from the shock.

La Folia, too, had a serious expression as she nodded.

“I know that there was an incident at the abbey where Kanon Kanase was

being raised five years ago. I wonder if perhaps the young Kanon Kanase's spiritual medium abilities, of which she was unaware, ran wild? Then, perhaps Kensei came to realize that she was of the Aldegian royal family as a result of that incident."

"So that's why he adopted Kanase as his own daughter. He wanted to use her for his magic ritual."

Kojou murmured with a bitter expression on his face. His worst fears about the relationship between the Kanase father and daughter had been confirmed.

"…Do you know what kind of magic ritual Kensei is performing, Kojou?"

In La Folia's question, Kojou heard a grave reverberation that hadn't been there before.

Overwhelmed by her dignified presence, Kojou's expression hardened as well.

"When we saw her, Kanase had…changed into something like a monster and was killing her own kind."

"Is that so? So Kensei is indeed moving forward with Faux-Angel."

"…Faux-Angel?"

Kojou raised his eyebrows at the ominous sound of the unfamiliar word.

"A magic ritual Kensei was researching. The objective is to force an artificial spiritual evolution so that a human being is reborn as a higher form of existence."

"*That* was Kanase in a spiritually evolved state…?"

Kojou seemed in a daze as he widened his eyes and made a weak shake of his head. The sight of Kanon, her mismatched, ugly wings spread, tearing out the throat of her comrade with her own teeth, wouldn't leave his mind. Who would ever believe that could be a spiritually evolved state, let alone some kind of angel…?

"…!"

In the midst of the awkward silence as Kojou and La Folia stared at each other, Yukina suddenly stood up. With a smooth, sliding sound, she deployed the

blades of the silver spear she gripped.

“Yukina?”

“A hovercraft,” Yukina informed Kojou and La Folia as they turned in surprise. She was looking at a black ship in a corner of the horizon, kicking up sea spray as it advanced. It was identical to the amphibious landing ship that Kojou had destroyed.

“That hovercraft… More Automata?” Kojou felt acute annoyance as he groaned.

Mechanized soldiers came to assault them several times over, but the result never changed. Kojou’s Beast Vassal destroyed them with extreme prejudice.

La Folia’s lifepod came equipped with a distress signal transmitter. She apparently hadn’t used it until now for fear of Magus Craft picking up the signal, but now that she’d joined up with Kojou and Yukina, they no longer had any such concerns. No doubt a search and rescue force had been dispatched to nearby waters to look for the princess; if they transmitted a distress call, the force would probably pick it up and come running right away.

That was why they could destroy the unmanned Magus Craft boat, useless to them even if they took it over, without a shred of restraint. With that thought, Kojou began to summon his Beast Vassal. But…

“No, that’s…”

Yukina spoke, as if to stop Kojou before he did so.

As Kojou looked where she was pointing, he understood why there was indecision mixed in with her voice.

There was a familiar silhouette standing on the deck of the unstylish hovercraft.

There was a tall, beautiful woman and a man who seemed a little too thin somehow. Beatrice and Kirishima.

Kojou got a light headache as he realized what Kirishima was waving at them: a large, plain cloth. It was a white flag indicating a cease-fire.

4

By a quirk of fate, Beatrice and Kirishima's landing craft was coming alongside the same inlet that the Automata had landed from but a few short hours before.

No doubt they picked the place that Kojou's Beast Vassal had scorched simply because its flat terrain, with bare basalt rock showing, was suitable for landing a hovercraft on.

The first to disembark was Beatrice. She was wearing a red leather bodysuit that only accentuated the voluptuous lines of her flesh.

A man came onto land behind her, dressed in black clothing that made him resemble a clergyman.

The last, Kirishima, popped his face out from the deck as he carried a stupidly huge flagpole.

"Hi, lovebirds. You look like you're in good shape. Did you kiss and make up…?"

"…Lowe Kirishima. …You've got some balls, crawling back here…"

He furiously waved his white flag as Kojou glared at him with bloodlust-filled eyes.

"Hold on a sec. I told you, if you're gonna hate someone, hate *her*. I'm just an errand boy here!"

Beatrice listlessly flicked her hair back as her subordinate pushed all the responsibility onto her.

Her display of alluring, corrupt sensuality made Kojou forget all about the complaints he was about to air.

Yukina glared at Kojou with eyes that somehow seemed reproachful. Then…

"It has been some time, Kensei Kanase."

Defenseless as she walked forward, La Folia spoke as she looked at the man in black clothing.

Kensei Kanase reverentially brought a hand to his own chest.

"It would seem you are in good humor, Your Highness… It has been seven

years, I believe? You have become very beautiful indeed."

"You have quite some nerve to say that after using my blood relative as the offering for your ritual," La Folia replied with a frosty tone. However, Kensei's expression did not change.

"I must object, Your Highness. I have treated Kanon with the utmost reverence. Surely, you of all people understand why I must utilize a girl who is like a daughter to me."

"So you must remake this girl into something inhuman, in spite of her being like a daughter to you?"

A tinge of scorn was mixed into La Folia's tone.

"No, I would say, it is *because* she is like a daughter to me that I must."

The silver-haired princess made a sigh as she listened to Kensei's unapologetic words.

"Kensei. Where is Kanon Kanase?"

"We prepared seven Faux-Angel samples. Of these, Kanon defeated three by herself, obtaining for herself their spiritual nodes and those of the ones who were defeated along the way. Combined with the seven spiritual nodes people are born with, that makes thirteen. By linking them together, they become thirty. That is the minimum number for human beings to raise their spiritual consciousness to the next level."

Kensei relayed his words in a polite tone. Certainly, his unfaltering manner of speech and tenor was worthy of a former palace magical engineer. Listening to his explanatory monologue, Yukina suddenly went pale.

"That can't mean…?!"

"Yukina?"

"You made Kanase slaughter her own kind…for *this*?! How dare you…!"

The look in Yukina's wide-open eyes registered fear, shock, and anger toward Kensei. It was rare for her to express strong emotions toward other people like this. Even if Kojou couldn't understand Kensei's explanation himself, Yukina's reaction was more than enough to shake him.

“The Faux-Angel ritual is a practical application of spiritual infusion. The candidates are made to fight and consume the others’ spiritual nodes, absorbing them into one’s own flesh. By absorbing them, I mean in a spiritual sense… And thus, an optimal body is produced from the survivor,” La Folia explained for the sake of the befuddled Kojou.

“Spiritual nodes are also called chakras. In other words, circuits of energy for the spiritual energy from which miracles are wrought,” Kensei continued where she left off.

“All humans are born with an equal number, but precious few can make use of them. Even first-rate spiritualists consider utilizing thirty percent of that potential to be a praiseworthy feat. A man who becomes enlightened enough to employ them all shall wield power equal to Buddha himself.”

Kensei smiled as an expression resembling sad resignation came over him.

La Folia continued to gaze coldly at him.

“Kensei’s hypothesis is that…if the output of the circuits is insufficient, simply add more, thereby absorbing one spiritual node after another from the seven Faux-Angel candidates, already strengthened to the limits of human endurance through sorcery. And through seizing the other candidates’ spiritual nodes and absorbing them into herself…”

“…It means that without exceeding the capacity of the human body, it becomes possible to undergo spiritual evolution into a being closer to God than man. In other words, an angel.”

Now that he’d listened to the end of Kensei and the princess’s alternating explanations, Kojou finally understood. It meant forcing a human being to rise to an angel’s level. Certainly, the magic ritual was as La Folia had said. He could accept why Kanon had consumed the bodies of her fallen comrades.

“But why the hell is your corporation helping out with a ritual like that? Doesn’t Magus Craft make cleaning robots?”

Kojou glared at Kirishima as he asked. The nature of the ritual was now clear. But the reason why an ordinary for-profit enterprise would provide the funds and human resources for such an inhumane experiment was not.

Even a Demon Sanctuary like Itogami City didn't permit a ritual where the Masked would fight each other and do severe damage to urban areas in the process. It was completely illegal conduct.

"Well, y'see…our company's kinda…financially screwed."

"Huh?"

"There's a big price war in the cleaning robot industry, the tech leaps ahead pretty quick, profit margins are slim… So they figured, hey, let's try developing Automata for armed conflict, we can sell those. Well, not so much if one shot from the princess's spell gun can wreck 'em like that. Actually, we bought up this whole island to use it for live fire exercises."

Kirishima scratched his nose and face as he spoke. His evasive, slippery excuses only made Kojou's scowl deepen.

Then, Kirishima sarcastically laughed. "So, that's why we decided to put all our chips into selling man-made angels as weapons."

"Weapons… The heck…? Whaddaya mean by that?!"

Kojou felt a chill creep up his spine.

The Masked, which Natsuki's attacks, Yukina's spear, even Kojou's Beast Vassals could not bring down…

What if they weren't experimental samples for spiritual evolution, but rather, simple mass-produced weapons? Even without thinking, he understood. They'd shoot to the top of the food chain and completely wreck the existing military balance with ease. There'd be all kinds of buyers.

"Hah… I'm sick of this. Enough of the small talk already. These brats aren't going to understand the difficulties of corporate finances or the hardships of hired demons." Beatrice, who had kept her silence until now, spoke as if at the end of her patience. "Anyway, that's how it is, so here's our demands: First, princess of Aldegia, cease your futile resistance and surrender. It's all right… We won't kill you if you behave."

"Do you think I take orders from a corporate stooge? Well, aren't you full of yourself," La Folia scoffed at Beatrice.

Beatrice's lips curled up to bare her ferocious canines. They were unnaturally large white fangs.

"You're fond of speaking down to others, bitch. Well, fine. I'm not inclined to kill you right away. Instead, I'll have fun with you until you wish you were dead!"

Licking her lips in inhumane fashion, her unenthusiastic gaze shifted to Kojou and Yukina.

"I suppose I'll give the two of you a chance."

"The heck do you mean?" said Kojou, glaring at Beatrice.

It was not she who moved, but Kensei. As he took a small remote control out of the side pocket of his black suit, Kirishima, seeing this, opened the lid of a container lying on top of the deck.

It was an airtight container that resembled a casket.

A small girl lay within, but she slowly sat up, with a pale, frigid aura enveloping her.

She wore simple clothes like that of a hospital patient. Her slender arms and legs were completely exposed. Her silver hair tumbled down. And she had hideous, mismatched wings.

"…Kanase!"

"Kanase?!"

Kojou and Yukina both yelled toward the girl awakening from her slumber.

Beatrice's thoroughly apathetic eyes gazed at the two of them.

"Fourth Primogenitor, Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency! I don't mind if it's the two of you together. Fight that girl seriously, would you?"

Anger broke through Kojou's amazement at the words woven by her lips.

"…You've gotta be kidding me. Why the hell would the two of us do anything like that?!"

"Surely it's obvious? For marketing material, of course. Just imagine it, 'Our company's Faux-Angel beat the Fourth Primogenitor, the World's Mightiest Vampire…to death!'"

Beatrice spoke with a look of contempt, as if she was dealing with a dim-witted child.

As if throwing down a challenge, Yukina pointed her razor-sharp blade at her.

“You intend to sell Kanase as a weapon?”

“Not quite, but hmm, you’re not far off the mark. Heh-heh,” Beatrice chuckled in a relaxed voice as she narrowed her eyes. “I don’t really mind if you have no intention of fighting. That means you’ll just roll over and die. A pity. And I thought I’d let you go if you actually survived… besides, it looks like she’s really raring to go.”

“What…?!”

Kojou took fright as he noticed the bizarre miasma Kanon’s body was emitting.

Her mismatched wings spread out, and Kanon slowly floated into the air. Her eyes were open, but her pupils were unfocused with no sign of emotion in them.

“And you’re fine with this, Kensei?” La Folia asked as she watched Kensei grip the remote control.

Kensei, turning his back as if escaping from the princess’s gaze, spoke to the receiver.

“XDA-7, activate. The final ceremony is upon us.”

5

Kojou couldn’t understand right away what happened in that instant.

Kanon’s wings spread and she floated into the air. The instant Kojou’s mind registered that, a silver flash of light shot past the corner of his vision.

The flash was actually Yukina’s spear. With Snowdrift Wolf poised, Yukina leaped forward with the force of a bullet, thrusting its blade up at Kanon.

It was a demon-purging spear that negated magical power and ripped through any kind of barrier.

If Kanon was an artificial angel produced via magical ritual, all she needed to

do was neutralize the spell itself. Surely that's what Yukina had thought. And that's what she attempted to do in the momentary opening before Kanon finished activating. But…

"Urk…?!"

The instant the tip of the spear reached Kanon's flesh, Yukina went flying instead. She flew back with the same force with which she'd leaped forward, thrusting her spear into the ground as she somehow managed to land safely.

"That's—?!"

Her hands numb from the recoil, Yukina tried to shelter them as she murmured in abject horror.

As she did so, Kanon did not pay her the slightest heed, soaring into the sky like nothing had happened.

"Divine Oscillation Effect…a Schneewaltzer, the Lion King Agency's secret weapon, is it not?" Kensei murmured with apparent satisfaction as he gazed at the silver light emitted by Yukina's spear.

"But it is futile. It is not even theoretically possible that a man-made 'divine' oscillation can harm a Faux-Angel possessing genuine divinity."

"That's…not…"

Yukina bitterly bit her lip. The spear she had been granted, which could defeat even the Beast Vassals of a Primogenitor, had never before been so completely negated. Not even Yukina could hide how it shook her.

Yet even so, Yukina's next decision was quick. She shifted in the direction of the remote control–holding Kensei and shot out once more. If she couldn't stop the Faux-Angel herself, she had no choice but to eliminate the caster controlling it. It was a completely natural conclusion, but it was the speed of Yukina's decision that was surely commendable.

However, the spear she wielded was deflected by a crimson flash.

"…I told you already, your opponent's over *there*."

It was Beatrice who stood before Yukina, speaking in an unenthused tone all the while.

A crimson spear had appeared from her hands with the force of freshly gushing blood. The long spear was greater in length than Beatrice's considerable height.

The height difference between Beatrice and Yukina was about twenty centimeters. The sensual, beautiful woman dressed in a red bodysuit looked far more extravagant than Yukina in her schoolgirl uniform. With the similarly long spear poised in her hands, the sense of dominance she gave off made it look like the difference between an adult and a child.

But Yukina was uncowed as she opened the distance between them. Beatrice's crimson spear was emitting a powerful, ominous surge of magic. Without doubt, that spear was a weapon produced by some sort of spell. Therefore, there was no way it could be a match for Yukina's Snowdrift Wolf. The demon-purging spear would surely annihilate that crimson weapon with a single blow—

Beatrice laughed loudly as if to mock Yukina's thoughts.

"Jagra! Skewer her!"

"…?!"

The moment before Yukina's spear was about to whirl and strike Beatrice's crimson spear down, the spear lashed out like a snake, attacking Yukina at a seemingly impossible angle.

Only Yukina's ability to see an instant into the future with her Sword Shaman's Spirit Sight enabled her to escape the surprise attack.

The crimson spear in Beatrice's hands changed into something like a living creature, attacking Yukina's blind spots over and over. It seemed to be attacking on its own, heedless of distance, stance, or the movements of the woman who wielded it.

"It can't be… A Beast Vassal in the form of a spear?!"

"A type of intelligent weapon… Surely that's not such a rare thing," Beatrice informed her in an unmoved voice, devoid of any thrill of victory. Even as she spoke, the crimson spear continued to stab without pause; Yukina kept deflecting it at the edges.

Kojou could no longer follow the attacks with his naked eyes; he could only

stand in shock.

“You’re saying it’s…a Beast Vassal in the form of a weapon?!”

Kojou, too, had vaguely realized that Beatrice was a vampire. She was probably from a different bloodline than Vattler. Perhaps she was a descendant of the Second or perhaps the Third Primogenitor.

Of course, this was not Kojou’s first encounter with a vampire other than himself. Compared to an Old Guard vampire like Dimitrie Vattler, her Beast Vassal’s attack power was rather meager.

And yet Beatrice, who only possessed such a weak Beast Vassal, was completely dominating Yukina. Her Beast Vassal was so menacing because of how it was part spear, part demonic familiar.

In the first place, the tremendous attack power of Beast Vassals was meaningless in one-on-one combat. It was like carpet bombing: The result was indiscriminate destruction. But Beatrice’s “spear” could pour all of its power into a single opponent. It was obvious which was more effective.

“Now, then… How about I wrap up my work over here?”

Making certain Yukina was having a hard time taking on Beatrice, Kirishima leaped down from the hovercraft.

He approached La Folia, his hands slovenly stuffed into his pockets the entire while. No doubt he meant to finish securing the princess as originally planned.

La Folia drew a gun from her hip. It was not her beloved spell gun, but rather, an ordinary machine pistol. It was comparatively small and light, with much of its frame made out of varnished wood; it rested quite comfortably in La Folia’s slender hands.

“Stay back, beast man.”

La Folia made her warning and fired at virtually the same instant. It was a full auto burst at close range. She blew through seventeen rounds in an instant, but Kirishima, standing wide open, did not go down.

“Electrum chips, huh? Nice bullets. A shame, though.”

Kirishima laughed as he scattered the bullets, grabbed with a bestialized hand,

at his feet. His slender body became the size of a large tree trunk as he transformed into a beast man with jet-black fur.

“Why rely on cheap garbage like this, princess? Or is your spell gun out of bullets?”

Kirishima spoke with a sarcastic tone. La Folia said nothing as she backed off and switched to a spare clip. She finished reloading her machine pistol with skill one wouldn’t expect of a princess.

Then, she looked up at the sky behind Kirishima in apparent surprise.

His interest perhaps piqued by her reaction, Kirishima looked up as well. What floated above them was Kanon Kanase, with magical runes glowing over her entire body.

“Kyriiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii—!” A high-pitched shriek gushed out of Kanon’s throat.

It was an achingly sad cry imbued with holy solemnity well outside a human’s vocal range. The light surrounding Kanon became more intense. Her grotesque body began transfiguring even further.

The fangs embedded in her mouth fell away; her cherubic facial features changed into a vision of idealized beauty. Her hideous, mismatched wings grew into three pairs of new, beautiful wings that shone with light.

Giant eyeballs emerged on the surface of those wings.

Without emotion, the “eyes” glared down upon the earth as if nothing could escape their gaze.

“That’s…Faux-Angel…?!”

Kojou ground his teeth as the pulse of hostility emitted by Kanon overwhelmed him.

His vampiric flesh registered pain, as if his very skin was burning. This overpowering magical energy wasn’t even in the same league as that of the Masked.

No, this was no longer magic energy at all. It deserved to be called a divine aura.

“Be careful, senpai! Her target is…”

Yukina shouted even as she and Beatrice continued to glare at each other.

The ground combat had descended into a lull with the emerging of the Faux-Angel.

For his part, Kirishima was still looking above his head, leaving securing the princess for later; Beatrice didn’t seem inclined to take on Yukina any more than necessary. No doubt they, too, wanted to see what would become of the Faux-Angel.

“Kyriiiiiiiiiiiiiiii—!” Kanon bellowed once more. Simultaneously, the eyes on her wings began to emit a light as bright as the sun.

The beam she shot out became a giant sword that struck the ground with incredible destructive force. The hard bedrock was pulverized and scattered, with crimson flames blowing all about.

But Kanon’s attack did not end there. With a flap of her three-by-six wings, the giant, wide-open eyeballs launched another beam at the ground surface, this one clearly aimed straight at Kojou.

To “Faux-Angel,” a servant of the gods, a mass of “negative” life energy cursed by the gods such as a vampire was a “mortal enemy” that had to be destroyed—all the more so where a Primogenitor was concerned.

“Ugh… C’mon over here, Regulus Aurum! Al-Nasl Minium…!”

Kojou no longer had any other options. If Kanon continued attacking him like this, she’d no doubt wipe out the entire island in short order. First, he had to use his Beast Vassals to stop Kanon. If he couldn’t do that, even Yukina and La Folia would be caught in the fallout and lose their lives.

“Kanase!!”

The golden lion enveloped by lightning and the mass of vibrations that was the incandescent bicorn charged into the sky toward the angel. These were attacks of a Primogenitor’s Beast Vassals, each said to possess power equal to a natural disaster.

However, those attacks, possessing enormous magical energy, could not even

manage to scratch Kanon's body.

Both attacks passed right through the flesh of the Faux-Angel, with only a minor, mirage-like ripple. The atmosphere was rent asunder, and thunder streaked like an azure arrow, but Kanon continued leisurely flying, unharmed.

"It is futile, Fourth Primogenitor," Kensei called out to Kojou.

He was watching Kanon's form with a look that seemed philosophical somehow. He held no excitement or joy toward the Faux-Angel he himself had brought into being.

"Kanon now exists on a higher plane of existence than we do. No matter how great the magical power your Beast Vassals boast, they cannot destroy what does not exist in this world…"

"Ugh…"

Kojou had no words with which to respond to Kensei's pitying gaze.

The giant eyes of the six wings of Faux-Angel turned toward Kojou once more.

Their bright, overpowering, sun-like radiance shone upon Kojou, leaving not even a single shred of shadow.

"Kanase—!"

Kojou shouted as he thrust his hand above his head toward Kanon. A moment later, the beam pierced him.

All sound vanished.

The light that thrust through Kojou's heart, accompanied by a ferocious impact and flames, filled everyone's vision with a white light.

Within that world of pure white light, Kojou's body gently fell forward and collapsed—

"Senpai?!"

"Kojou!"

Yukina and La Folia fought against the furious blast winds as they ran toward the fallen Kojou.

Kanon's attack had gouged a semispherical blast crater out of the ground, with white steam hissing its way up from the surface of half-molten rock. Kojou's flesh was heavily shredded, though it miraculously remained in one piece.

"Over already… The World's Mightiest Vampire sure went out with a whimper."

Kirishima seemed bored as he murmured while watching Yukina and La Folia stand over Kojou in shock.

But realizing that the blast winds were only increasing in strength, his bestialized expression grew tense.

He began to feel sharp sensations mixed in with the wind that buffeted him. Their source: shards of ice.

The seawater blown up by the blast winds had frozen, transforming into icy blades.

"Wh-what is this…? Beast Vassal going berserk?!" Kirishima murmured, his voice nervous and shaking.

Having lost their master, the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor had begun running amok beyond all control. It was a frightening situation to even contemplate. If such titanic masses of magical energy released their power indiscriminately, fatal damage would be inflicted not only upon the tiny island, but also on anything else at sea in a ten-kilometer radius.

But the situation was beyond even his worst expectations.

"Ooaaaaaaaaaaaaa—!"

It was not Kojou Akatsuki's Beast Vassals in the eye of the storm, but Kanon Kanase.

Clutching her own head, the Faux-Angel wailed as tears of blood rolled down her cheeks.

Her wail gave rise to a waterspout, expanding into the violent winds that were now freezing the seawater in the area.

"Kensei Kanase. What's happening? What is that?"

Beatrice glared at the sorcerous engineer with a reproachful look.

Kensei calmly shook his head as he stared at the unresponsive remote control.

“I don’t know. She shouldn’t be at the point of ascension yet, but…”

“Ah, really… *Haa*, so irritating… I’ve lost my motivation.”

Murmuring as if spitting out the words, Beatrice dematerialized her own Beast Vassal. She turned her back on the Faux-Angel and walked off.

“Hey, BB?”

“We’re pulling back for now. I’m not interested in getting caught up in that thing.”

Beatrice spoke with an unenthusiastic voice, looking back as Kirishima hurried to catch up to her.

The waterspout enveloping the Faux-Angel had now completely frozen over, transforming into a gigantic pillar of ice. Spiraling its way down to the ground, it had already reached a ten-meter radius even as it continued to grow. Beatrice and the others took shelter inside the landing craft; they had virtually no hope of escaping from the island.

In the process, they left behind the defeated Fourth Primogenitor and the two girls with him, even as a violent snowstorm raged all around.

“Akatsuki! Akatsuki—!”

The small girl in a schoolgirl uniform clung to the Fourth Primogenitor as she continued to call out to him.

For her part, the silver-haired princess continued to gaze at the pillar of ice that towered above their heads.

“Faux-Angel… No, Kanon Kanase… You…”

Within the transparent ice, the man-made angel slept, even as she continued to wail.

The gigantic pillar of ice and snow greatly resembled the holy tower called Babel that heaven had struck down long ago.

Chapter Five
The Amphisbaena

CHAPTER FIVE

THE AMPHISBAENA

1

The rusty, dusty, and dark cargo was filled with sparks scattering from ricochets, the sound of footsteps marching to an eerily perfectly cadence, and ghoulish soldiers clad in black armor, approaching with light machine guns in hand.

"—Heek?!"

Sayaka Kirasaka let out a yelp as she ran about, trying to escape the horrible barrage coming at a speed of 725 rounds per minute.

She was inside the freighter *Amalgosa*. On her way to rescue Kojou and the others, the coast guard patrol ship Sayaka was aboard encountered this ship, belonging to Magus Craft, at sea. And so, Sayaka had boarded to hear what the situation was, only to be greeted by a hail of gunfire.

"What's with these guys?! No one told me I was heading into a firefight here!!"

Sayaka lamented while wielding her long silver sword as if she was dancing.

The sword was named Lustrous Scale—a prototype transformable suppression weapon developed by the Lion King Agency.

The sword's arc created a spatial distortion that interrupted all manner of physical attacks. Attacks from mere light machine guns were easy to defend against.

In spite of this, the spatial distortions created by Lustrous Scale were not created by physically slashing through space; it was simply a spell emulating the effect that was caused *by* cutting space. Accordingly, the effect's duration was

momentary; furthermore, the time lag between activations that accompanied its use was a significant shortcoming. Irrespective of Sayaka's level of combat skill, it was a fatal shortcoming, one ruthlessly exposed by the ceaseless gunfire.

Sayaka fled under the shadow of a container still remaining in the cargo hold and breathed a sigh of relief, when…

"…Huh?!"

The door behind Sayaka opened; more soldiers appeared.

Sayaka's expression froze over as she became caught in an unanticipated pincer attack. The newly appeared soldiers only numbered three. With Sayaka's combat ability, she could neutralize them in mere seconds.

However, during that time, Sayaka's back would be completely defenseless. That was Lustrous Scale's third shortcoming: It could not simultaneously create spatial distortions to the front and the rear.

Sayaka clicked her tongue at her unexpected predicament. *Rip through the whole ship then?* Sayaka wondered as she raised her blade high.

Lustrous Scale had numerous defensive applications, but its offensive capability was tremendous. No doubt it could slice through even the thick hull of the freighter like it was paper. If she did so, the *Amalgosa* would certainly sink, but she had no other way to dig herself out of her combat situation.

However, as Sayaka moved without hesitation to swing down her sword, a gentle wave extended across the space right before her eyes. The air wavered like a ripple on the surface of the water as a small human silhouette came through. It was a baby-faced woman covered in an extravagant frilly dress and a raised parasol.

And what appeared behind her was an *arm*: a giant mechanical arm encased with golden armor. Even the palm alone was larger than the girl was tall.

That arm, suddenly appearing out of thin air, lifted up all of the black-armored soldiers that had appeared behind Sayaka at once and crushed them. The attack had all the ease of plucking a weed growing on the roadside.

The soldiers' machine guns bounced off the golden armor without being able

to so much as scratch it, whereas fragments of their smashed cogs and armor scattered all about.

“Natsuki Minamiya? Where did you come from…?!” Sayaka asked while she stood dumbfounded, the timing for her sword strike now lost.

Of course, she was nominally aware that Natsuki Minamiya, a teacher at Saikai Academy, was an Attack Mage of incredible skill also known as the Witch of the Void. However, she could not conceal her surprise at seeing with her own eyes how she could use high-end sorcery like spatial control magic with the same ease as breathing.

“I see. Certainly, this is all according to the data Yaze brought.”

Natsuki Minamiya, the controller of the giant arm, murmured as if bored as she picked up a piece from one of the soldiers scattered apart.

“So this was why a robot maker was doing research in a Demon Sanctuary…? They were using necromantic rituals to get around the First Law of Robotics that’s burned into every Automata’s activation core. Of course, such infantile methods won’t raise capabilities any… No wonder they lost a lot of money trying to sell these to militaries.”

“Automata soldiers… Then, Magus Craft’s off-the-books business is…”

Sayaka’s eyebrows made a scowl as she lowered her sword. Based on the soldiers’ eerily orthodox movements and the strength to wave around heavy machine guns without batting an eyebrow, she could easily accept that they were machines. So the shadow accounts at Magus Craft’s home office were from contracts to sell mechanized troops to the Confederate States of America.

Elegantly twirling her parasol, Natsuki looked behind her at the mechanical dolls.

“We’ve arrested all of the crew aboard this ship. All that remains are these worthless toys. You specialize in dealing with riffraff like that, don’t you, Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency?”

“N-not that I want to have work just shoved onto me?!”

Even as Sayaka raised her complaint, Lustrous Scale was changing shape.

The blade split and spread out to the front and back, with the long sword changing shape to become a beautifully arched silver compound bow. This was the true form of Sayaka's Der Freischötz, Lustrous Scale.

Sayaka took a metallic dart out from under her rolled-up skirt, extending it and using the bow to draw it. Then, she shot at the mass of onrushing black-plated soldiers—

The flying arrow scattered about a shrill cry resembling a wailing voice. This was a powerful curse. The cry released by Sayaka's magic bow made possible the chanting of a spell with intensity that human vocal cords and lungs could not endure.

Sayaka had used an Arrow of Dispel. The sorcerous ritual that controlled the Automata was overwritten and neutralized by a curse of even greater power. Such were the tactics of a specialist in curses and assassination such as Sayaka.

With their strings burned away in an instant, the mechanical marionettes came to a halt.

Confirming this, Sayaka made a weary sigh. She hadn't come to this place to take on soldiers like that.

"…Is this ship really a research facility for the Masked, I wonder?" Sayaka asked while looking up at Natsuki nonchalantly opening her parasol.

"The cargo hold has an airtight block that was used as a lab. We've already seized the data. It would seem the Gigafloat Management Corporation's board of directors is using the scandal to short sell Magus Craft shares on a large scale. It will either be crushed entirely or become a subsidiary under the Business Department."

"…Meaning the Demon Sanctuary's Research Department's cutting ties with them?"

"Only if their current experiment fails."

Natsuki spoke with displeasure in her voice. Faux-Angel, an illegal human experiment, had inflicted great damage to Itogami Island. At the very least, Magus Craft's Demon Sanctuary branch would certainly be shuttered with its employees facing criminal charges.

But if Faux-Angel should triumph over the Fourth Primogenitor, that was another story. No nation's defense department could overlook a weapon of such capabilities. Even if Magus Craft itself should fall, the research would no doubt be inherited by a different corporation.

In the end, the course of events depended entirely on whether the Fourth Primogenitor—in other words, Kojou Akatsuki—could defeat Faux-Angel or not.

"Ah, one more thing. Just under an hour ago, the coast guard received a distress signal from an Aldegian lifepod."

"Princess La Folia is safe?"

Sayaka's expression brightened. It had been a while since she'd had any good news. But for some reason, Natsuki continued her words with displeasure in her voice.

"It seems she's on the same island as Akatsuki."

"…Kojou Akatsuki and the princess…together?"

An ill feeling without form or substance came over Sayaka, making her grimace, too.

Sayaka's intuition as a shrine maiden told her deep inside it was a bad omen. Little was known of her in Japan, but La Folia Rihavein was at the ripe age of seventeen. The princess was so beautiful she was said to be the second coming of Freya, the Norse goddess of beauty.

For Kojou Akatsuki to encounter a beautiful princess on a remote island cut off from all civilization…

No matter what kind of optimistic images she imagined, the only futures that came to mind were filled with despair.

"Anyway, no point staying on this ship any longer, is there? Then, let's hurry to Yukina and the rest! That'll settle this whole thing." Sayaka's impatience was plain to see.

However, just as Natsuki was about to leave the deck of the freighter, her feet suddenly halted.

"It'd be nice if things went that easy."

“What do you mean?”

Following Natsuki’s gaze, Sayaka shifted her eyes toward the sea. Then, she froze in shock. Even at the far edge of the horizon, the calamity that was unfolding was visible to the naked eye.

The surface of the sea was frozen over across a radius of several kilometers. Appearing in the center was a gigantic pillar of ice. The pillar, a spiral of frozen water, extended far aloft into the sky.

“What…is that…?!”

Sayaka barely managed to mumble the words. It was clear that the uninhabited island Kojou and the others were on was the origin point of the anomaly. In other words, neither Yukina nor La Folia were uninvolved bystanders.

“It would seem that idiot’s gotten himself involved in another fine mess…”

Natsuki sighed with a neutral look on her face.

Sayaka’s eyes remained wide open in shock as she gazed at the tapered pillar of ice sparkling from the rays of the sun.

2

“—I, Maiden of the Lion, Sword Shaman of the High God, beseech thee!”

Raising the silver spear above her head, Yukina loudly recited her chant. As her call echoed loud and clear, the keen blade emitted a dazzling light.

“O divine wolf of the snowdrift, let the echoes of thy thousand howls become a shield and repel this calamity!”

When the pale light vanished, a semispherical space some four to five meters in diameter appeared around Yukina and the others. It was a defensive ward spread using Snowdrift Wolf’s Divine Oscillation Effect.

The outer edge of the ward was a thick glacier-like wall of ice.

Beyond that outer wall, snow continued to fall and blow around ferociously even now, with the surrounding land and the surface of the ocean freezing over.

Like the Inuit who dwelled in the Arctic Circle and passed the winter in domed houses of snow, Yukina had constructed an igloo for them to flee into.

Lying in the center of the ward was Kojou, who had not regained consciousness even now. If Yukina had not instantly set up the barrier, he'd not only have been frozen over by now, but also likely crushed under thick layers of ice.

"…You've done well, Yukina. We should be able to hold out for a while now." La Folia spoke while looking over the ice-sealed ceiling.

The flip side of being surrounded by thick ice was that the blowing snow didn't affect them at all; it was actually surprisingly warm. Eventually they'd suffocate from lack of oxygen, but it seemed they were otherwise safe for the moment.

"Yes. However, I must apologize. Escaping has become even more difficult."

"There's no need to think about it now. It's still a snowstorm outside, after all."

Yukina was biting her lip with a hard expression as La Folia made an elegant, charming smile toward her.

"This snow and ice. What does it look like to you, Yukina?"

As she touched the wall of ice, Yukina replied calmly, as if making an oracle. "I do not know. But I strongly sense Kanase's feelings in them."

Loneliness, unease, fear, despair—it was as if the wall of cold, transparent ice conveyed a frigid sadness. There was no hatred or resentment, only a transparent emotion that approached nothingness.

"I thought you might. That is what I think as well. It is likely Kanon Kanase's psychological state given physical form, influenced by the Faux-Angel ritual."

La Folia murmured as she looked up with a pitying look.

She was looking straight at the center of the pillar of ice, where Kanon was curled up in a fetal position. Her sublime, beautiful form looked like that of a crying child.

"If that is so, then Kanase is still…"

Without hesitation, La Folia decisively replied to Yukina's question. "Yes. She has not lost herself. If we can break the spell, Kanon Kanase will become human once more. However, we cannot get close to her in this state. For that matter, whether we can even leave here alive is in question."

"I'm sure that won't be a problem. When Kojou awakens, an ice wall of this thickness won't pose any problem."

"Senpai is…"

Yukina knelt by the fallen Kojou's side and softly peered within.

His body, which had sustained damage that ought to have been absolutely fatal, was already largely healed. His burned flesh, and his gaping wounds that exposed even bone, had already healed without even a trace.

However, one place, a cross-shaped wound impaling the very center of his chest, was the exception…

Realizing there was divine energy blowing out from the open wound, Yukina sucked in her breath a little.

The golden, gleaming divine energy continued to eat away at Kojou's body, composed of negative life force, like acid, slowly annihilating it.

"This wound…?!"

"The place he was stabbed by Faux-Angel's sword. The sword continues to impale Kojou's body even now. It is a sword neither of us can even touch." La Folia informed her even as her own Spirit Sight confirmed the existence of the invisible sword.

That sword, extra-planar like the angel herself, prevented Kojou from healing, even as it caused Kojou's body, which should have been immutable, to gradually waste away. Thanks to the divine energy flowing from the sword, at this rate, it would not be far off until Kojou vanished altogether.

"…What must we do to save him?" Yukina gave La Folia a serious look as she asked.

Properly speaking, Yukina, who was no more than the Fourth Primogenitor's watcher, had no duty to save Kojou. However, Yukina could not even

contemplate making the decision to simply watch him die.

La Folia, gazing at Yukina with great interest, shook her head.

“We cannot heal Kojou’s wound.”

“…Oh no…”

Blood drained from Yukina’s cheeks.

The Faux-Angel ritual was a secret ceremony of Aldegia. If La Folia said there was no way to break it, Yukina would be completely out of options.

However, the princess narrowed her trademark pale blue eyes in a mischievous look as she continued.

“However, we can awaken that which can save him. In the first place, being impaled by Faux-Angel’s sword should have already annihilated Kojou’s body. The fact that his body continues to exist despite that means that Kojou is subconsciously drawing upon that power.”

“Senpai’s power…?”

Prodded by La Folia, Yukina lowered her gaze to Kojou’s open wound once more. If she looked at the steady progression of Kojou’s annihilation from another perspective, it felt like *something* was holding the angel’s power in check.

“…You don’t mean the Fourth Primogenitor’s Beast Vassals?!”

“I do. Kojou Akatsuki inherited twelve Beast Vassals from the Kaleid Blood, Avrora Florestina. It is likely that one of those Beast Vassals possesses the power to neutralize that of Faux-Angel.”

Yukina nodded, agreeing with the princess’s words.

Kojou still couldn’t use the majority of the Fourth Primogenitor’s Beast Vassals of his own volition.

But several times in the past, a portion of the dormant Beast Vassals’ power ran amok in response to their host, Kojou, falling into danger. That was probably what was going on this time as well.

“But wake up a Beast Vassal how…? Right now senpai isn’t conscious; surely it

is not possible for an external force to interfere with a vampire's Beast Vassals?" Yukina asked in a brooding tone of voice. This time, La Folia nodded in complete seriousness.

"This is a first for me as well so I am a bit concerned if I can pull it off, but I have heard of the method from rumors among the maids. There is surely value in trying."

Having spoken these words, the princess softly reached out to Kojou's clothes. She stripped off the parka that the unconscious Kojou was lying on, unbuttoning his wrecked school uniform from the top down.

Judging from the shaking of his upper body, Kojou's chest wound was painful indeed.

It looked like La Folia had forgotten how to breathe as she watched with a serious expression. Kojou had seemed gangly to her, but with his clothes off, he had an unexpectedly firm physique, no doubt due to being a full-time basketball player until just before he became a vampire.

"…So this is what your body is like?"

With an expression of deep interest on her face, the princess poked Kojou's side, as if testing the elasticity of his abdominal muscles.

It was when she suddenly began to strip off Kojou's pants that Yukina reproached her with a suspicious look. "Er… La Folia?"

La Folia lifted her face up as she pulled off Kojou's belt. "My apologies. I fell victim to my curiosity; I'm taking mental notes for future reference."

Yukina sighed. "Wait, why are you taking off *your* clothes, too?!"

As the princess began to suddenly take off her own clothes this time, Yukina rushed to stop her. Perhaps there were spells that required direct flesh-to-flesh contact, but even so, this was not something she could let pass.

However, the princess blinked and tilted her head as she asked her question. "I have heard that intimate relations between a man and a woman involve embracing the other while nude. Am I mistaken?"

"I-intimate relations…?"

Yukina's face froze as she tried to process La Folia's statement and failed.

La Folia gave Yukina a quite serious look in return.

"I believe a foolproof method of awakening a Beast Vassal is for a spiritual medium to offer her blood."

"Th-that is certainly the case, but…," Yukina weakly objected.

Kojou's being unable to use the power of his Beast Vassals was apparently tied to his having barely drunk the blood of others at all. Thanks to that, the Beast Vassals did not acknowledge Kojou as their true master, and thus, did not respond to his summons. Furthermore, his proud Beast Vassals required blood of a high spiritual grade to sate their appetites.

Surely, the blood of La Folia, princess of Aldegia, was of sufficient spiritual grade, but…

"But…drink blood, you say? Right now senpai isn't even conscious…"

"That poses no difficulty. The trigger for vampiric urges is sexual arousal, yes? With proper physical stimulation, it is surely possible to trigger such a response even if he isn't conscious. My maids say that what happens above the neck and below the belt is completely separate."

"…B-below the belt?"

"*Heh-heh*, they say the body tells no lies."

Yukina made a covert sigh as she watched La Folia's innocent smile. She wondered if perhaps the Aldegian royal family should pay a little more attention to the sort of people it hired for domestic work.

"Do not be concerned, Yukina. I do not yet have any serious intention of having sexual relations with him."

"Of course you don't!"

Yukina's cheeks were red as she shouted. She couldn't help but be concerned at her use of the word *yet*. Yukina couldn't nail down just how serious this free-spirited princess was speaking those words.

La Folia stripped off her dress jacket, calmly undoing the buttons of the shirt

beneath it as well. From her collar down, her flesh was as white as the driven snow. Also, the swell of her breasts was unexpectedly large.

“Well then, Yukina. Would you close your eyes for a few moments? Naturally, I feel somewhat…embarrassed to be doing this kind of thing in front of someone else.”

Speaking these words, La Folia pulled Kojou’s body up into her arms. Yukina could not look away from how their bare flesh was pressing together. Pushing her silver hair up off her cheek, La Folia drew close to the sleeping Kojou’s face. And just as their lips were about to touch…

“…You mustn’t!”

Yukina shouted the words before her head thought them. The princess seemed a bit surprised as she raised her face.

“Yukina?”

“Y-you mustn’t, La Folia! I do not believe you need to do this!”

Yukina’s voice was shrill as she strongly pulled Kojou’s body in her direction, as if snatching it back. However, the princess had a composed look on her face.

“This is to save you, me, and Kanon Kanase. It cannot be helped.”

“That…might be so, and there might not be another way, but…”

La Folia made a casual, charming smile as she looked back at the unsteadily murmuring Yukina.

“Thank you for your concern. However, I am quite all right. Is it not natural to save one who can still be saved, such as Kojou?”

Yukina was a bit overawed by the gallantry with which the princess had put it.

Yukina had been thoroughly thrown off by the princess’s frivolous behavior, but La Folia’s words were proper and just. The course she was attempting was the best option to save everyone trapped there.

To her, offering her own blood to a vampire was nothing but another duty as a member of the royal family. This was how this beautiful princess of a foreign kingdom had borne many burdens all by herself and would no doubt bear many

more to come.

But *this was different.*

It was not the princess who needed to bear this burden.

“…I will do it.”

This time, Yukina completely seized the sleeping Kojou back from La Folia as she spoke.

The princess blinked her eyes in apparent surprise. “Oh?”

“Saving senpai is my responsibility. I-I am the Fourth Primogenitor’s watcher, after all.”

Yukina declared that it was so with a resolute expression. The twinkle in her eyes conveyed without any need for words, *no matter what more you may say, princess, you may not have him*.

As Yukina did so, La Folia made a light nod—as if she’d been waiting for that moment.

“I understand, Yukina. Well then, I shall leave this in your hands.”

“…Eh?”

Yukina felt like she was being brushed off when, suddenly, a dumbfounded expression came over her.

The princess was watching her with a charming leer on her face. When Yukina saw her beautiful, smiling face, she knew she’d been had. She’d been in the palm of the princess’s hand from start to finish.

“Er, La Folia… You intended this from the beginning, didn’t you…?!”

Watching the outraged Yukina clutching Kojou all the while, the princess spoke without a hint of mischief as if speaking a prayer.

“I believe, Yukina. I believe that if anyone can save Kojou, it is you.”

3

The pillar of ice born from Kanon Kanase’s rampage finally stopped growing

shortly after exceeding ten meters in diameter. The snow had already abated. But the majority of the island was encased in ice and was shrouded in a pure white frost.

The area above the narrow space Yukina and the others were in was encased by ice several meters thick, which made ominous creaks from time to time. Of course, they could not escape; indeed, the ice seemed just as likely to collapse under its own weight.

Amid this desperate situation, Kojou alone continued to sleep peacefully.

Even though his own body was slowly fading away, he had a peaceful look on his face as he slept.

"…You really are something else…"

As she gazed at Kojou's sleeping face, Yukina made a sigh mixed with a strained smile. He slept without any hint of tension as if making sport of her pathetic resolve; it seemed rather ridiculous somehow.

"Are you all right, Yukina? If you are anxious, perhaps I really should do it instead?"

La Folia seemed amused as she asked. Yukina shook her head with an awkward look on her face.

A small part of her wanted to follow that suggestion, but there was no way she could ask her to trade places at this point. Besides, she didn't want to see the princess embrace Kojou. For some reason it made her heart ache.

"No problem whatsoever. This is just like CPR, yes, like artificial respiration, you see."

Yukina murmured in a tone that sounded like it was chiefly for her own benefit. La Folia made a nod of apparent admiration.

"Artificial respiration… Indeed, it is so. The mouth-to-mouth version."

"U…rk."

Yukina's face went red as she unwittingly pictured the scene. Her effort not to think about it went up in smoke.

Yukina brought the tip of her spear, lying beside her, against the tip of her finger.

She registered a faint pain as she pressed the blade in very softly. Yukina took her fingertip, with fresh blood now dripping heavily from the wound, and pushed it inside of Kojou's mouth.

Even as he continued to sleep like the dead, Kojou's tongue made a faint quiver, like a convulsion.

The change was so small that it could barely be seen by the naked eye, but Kojou was indeed still alive. Even so, the amount of blood was nowhere near sufficient. He apparently needed a much larger quantity flowing into him.

"Kojou's reaction is weaker than I expected. Perhaps you are not giving him enough stimulation?"

La Folia's tone was uncharacteristically serious as she spoke. Yukina's face went even redder.

"S…stimulation…?"

"The level of bare flesh in contact, perhaps? *Hee-hee*, shall I assist you?"

"No, that's quite all right. I will do it… I'll do it, so—!"

Swiping away the princess's hand reaching out to her from behind, Yukina put a hand to the top of her uniform. At this rate, Kojou would never open his eyes again. She didn't need to worry about him seeing her like this. Removing the ribbon, Yukina opened up the front of her uniform, gently pressing herself against the sleeping Kojou.

“That’s not enough exposure,” said La Folia in dissatisfaction, but Yukina ignored her, this time touching her blade to the inside of her wrist. She made a wound as deep as she could go and still heal it by ritual, causing her own blood to spurt out.

The fresh blood pooled onto Kojou’s cheek and flowed into his mouth.

His lips conveyed a corpse-like chill to her exposed skin. But there was a tiny bit of warmth left. As if trying to not lose sight of that warmth, Yukina squeezed her arm around Kojou tighter. Finally, with a small sound in his throat, she sensed Kojou swallowing down the blood flowing into him.

“…Senpai?! Senpai, can you hear me?!” Yukina called out to Kojou right into his ear. And in Yukina’s own ear…

“Please continue, Yukina. Kojou can feel you.”

“Wh-why are you watching this, La Folia?!”

Yukina’s voice was turned inside out as she met the eyes of the princess observing her from point-blank range.

La Folia had a mystified look on her face. “I have heard nothing from you to the effect of ‘Don’t watch, I’m too embarrassed’ or ‘Don’t look at me’…”

“I-I didn’t say it, but I believe it is just common sen… Nn?!”

During the time her attention was occupied by the princess’s behavior, Yukina was suddenly embraced and shaken by a powerful force. Kojou, who was surely still unconscious, touched Yukina’s tongue, as if lured by the lingering scent of blood.

Yukina’s body startled and froze as she felt the unfamiliar sensation transmitted by the tip of her tongue.

She felt a numbness climb up her spine, as if strength was being drained from her entire body.

Even so, Yukina lifted her head in earnest.

“S-senpai?! Are you awake?! Where are you touching…? Wa…!”

Kojou’s fingertips, guided by instinct alone, gently ran up Yukina’s back.

Rigid, Yukina gasped audibly. La Folia covered her mouth with a fiery twinkle in her eyes as she leaned forward.

“Oh my…”

“Senpai! The princess is watching, so… No! …Th-that’s my…?!”

Yukina arched back heavily as Kojou’s fingertip touched the sensitive flesh on the inside of her uniform.

As if drawn to Yukina’s slender, white, defenseless neck, Kojou sank his fangs into her skin. “Urk,” went Yukina, biting her lip as if to gird herself against the pain. However, she offered no resistance as Kojou, unconscious even now, gently embraced her.

“…”

Neither of them moved as La Folia turned her back, seemingly out of consideration.

Then, the princess suddenly lifted her face—for she sensed Faux-Angel’s divine energy, still ceaselessly pouring into Kojou’s open wound, disappear.

The chest wound that had seemingly been eating away at Kojou’s body gingerly grew shallower and vanished.

“The angel’s sword has been…consumed?”

La Folia murmured as she glanced over her shoulder.

“As I expected of you, Kojou… With such a Beast Vassal serving you…you really can do it…”

Still holding up the unconscious Yukina, Kojou yawned. The princess nodded as she watched him before shifting her gaze up above her head.

The man-made angel continued to sleep within a white, gleaming world of ice and snow.

4

“Gwa…!”

Kojou awoke to ferocious pain, like every cell in his entire body was being ripped apart.

He'd experienced this pain previously. It was characteristic of having revived after sustaining injuries severe enough to cause instant death.

"Kojou, are you awake?"

As Kojou groaned in anguish, he opened his eyes; La Folia was looking down at him with a calm expression as their eyes met. He beheld the graceful features of her face, like those of a serene statue, and her silver hair. Against the backdrop of a transparent wall of ice, her beauty seemed unreal; he felt like he was still seeing a dream.

"La Folia? Where am I? So I'm still…alive…?"

Kojou was perplexed at the sweet, lingering taste of blood in his mouth and the soft, warm sensation against his flesh as he awkwardly sat up.

He felt something odd from his slightly numb left arm.

There was a supple weight in it that felt nice, like the feel of cradling a kitten in your arms.

He could feel smooth skin; a charming fragrance filled his nostrils. There was something magnetic about the lovely suppleness. The silky hair that lightly brushed down against him tickled in a pleasant way. Yes, this was Yukina's hair brushing against…

"…Wait, what the heck is thiiiis?!"

This time, the realization that Yukina was sleeping within his arms woke Kojou up for real. He was shocked beyond words. Kojou had no idea when, but his clothes had been stripped off; he was currently naked from the waist up.

With Kojou like that, here was Yukina, sleeping soundly in his arms. Her sleeping face felt even more youthful than usual, making her cute to a truly amazing degree. She looked as pretty as a budding flower.

But that was not something Kojou was in any position to appreciate.

"H-Himeragi?! Why is she?!"

“Please calm down, Kojou.”

La Folia spoke as if exasperated from watching Kojou become so very flustered.

“Er, no, you can say to calm down all you want, but I don’t remember doing anything like…”

“I know. Yukina provided you with her own blood to revive you. If she had not, you would already have been annihilated via Faux-Angel’s power.”

“Himeragi…did that for me…?”

Kojou shifted his eyes to the still-sleeping Yukina once more. Even now, there were still puncture marks from fangs on Yukina’s pale neck. He wasn’t seeing things; Kojou had inflicted this wound upon her.

Kojou touched the pit of his own stomach and exhaled heavily.

He thought it was strange to have revived so easily after sustaining that Faux-Angel attack, but it hadn’t been the case at all; indeed, Yukina had saved him once again.

Kojou couldn’t put into words the gratitude he felt toward the tiny girl in his arms.

Though he was reluctant to part with the pleasant warmth against his flesh, Kojou gently laid Yukina down on the ground. He averted his eyes from her open uniform.

“Anyway, would you dress Yukina back up? Even you can’t just leave her like this.”

La Folia made a pleasant smile as she nodded.

“I understand… Though it feels rather late for such sentiments after such an intense, intimate encounter, *hee-hee*.”

“What the hell are you talking about?!”

Kojou was shaken once more at the notion he’d committed wicked deeds while unconscious. The fact he couldn’t remember made him all that much more uneasy. What in the world had he and Yukina done right before the princess’s

eyes? His pants half off and Yukina's uniform was open like that. Why…?

Unintentionally looking up while tormented by unease, Kojou's expression suddenly grew grave, for he had noticed Kanon sleeping within the ice.

"Kanase…!"

The midday sun shone straight through the transparent, spiraling pillar of ice. Kanon was curled up within that golden light.

The wings on her back were folded, with no hint of those dreadful eyeballs. Perhaps they, too, were asleep.

"Right after she impaled you, she lost control of herself and went berserk," La Folia stood beside Kojou and explained.

Hearing that, Kojou gasped while glancing at the side of her face.

"You mean Kanase's still in there?"

"Yes. However, this unstable state surely cannot continue for long. At this rate, her consciousness will eventually dissipate."

"…So we've gotta save her before that happens."

Kojou groaned from the back of his mouth. Gazing at him, La Folia narrowed her eyes in apparent joy.

Kanon Kanase was an opponent who'd already tried to kill him. In spite of that, Kojou thought only of saving her—as if that was perfectly natural. "Hmph," went the princess, her lips forming a broad smile as she drew close to Kojou's face.

Seeing the princess get oddly close, Kojou's heart thumped harder as he backed up.

As Kojou did so, La Folia grabbed both of his arms and drew even closer. That was when Kojou finally realized that the princess only had a thin shirt over her.

How did things get like this? thought Kojou in a panic. La Folia was completely composed as she looked at him.

"…Even after such passionate conduct, I still do not sense a new Beast Vassal awakening…"

"Y-yeah, that's right, come to think of it."

Now that you mention it, thought Kojou as he tilted his head a bit. Setting his sense of responsibility for what had happened aside, Kojou certainly was feeling the aftereffects of sucking on Yukina's blood. However, he didn't feel that he had gained control of a third Beast Vassal.

So sucking blood from the same human won't awaken another Beast Vassal…? thought Kojou, gripped by doubt.

"This Beast Vassal… I see, so that's how it is?"

For some reason, La Folia made a pleasant smile as she seemed to grasp something all by her lonesome. Then, she abruptly got on her tiptoes and touched her own lips to Kojou's cheek. It was a light kiss, like a peck from a tiny bird…

"Wha…?!"

Kojou reeled from the unexpected onslaught.

Watching Kojou's innocent reaction, La Folia's voice let out a giggle and smiled. The smile stayed on her face as she brought a hand to her shirt and began unfastening the remaining buttons.

Kojou hastily put up a hand to stop her.

"The heck are you doing?! Have you lost your mind?!"

"Why are you nervous? You have seen all of me once before, have you not?"

"That's not the point! And there was mist all over the place back then…!"

Kojou desperately excused himself as La Folia looked up, her lips in a pout.

The image of the princess bathing in the spring arose from the back of his mind, reviving the insistent throb from his canine teeth. It was an extremely bad sign that his vampiric urges were returning with a vengeance.

"Am I indeed not as charming as Yukina?"

La Folia spoke as a forlorn expression suddenly came over her. It was a look completely unsuited to her usual self, brimming with confidence.

"No, that's not the case at all, but… Wait, what's it to you, anyway?!"

The princess smiled charmingly, seeming quite satisfied as she looked up at

Kojou as he objected with a mysterious sense of guilt.

“Is that so? I’m quite relieved.”

“About what?!” Kojou replied with a question, for this greatly increased *his* unease.

The princess bashfully lowered her eyes as she made a pained, seemingly fleeting smile.

“I know nothing about this. I thought that this might be an opportunity to learn the basics on how to behave in such a situation should my marriage be arranged as a member of the royal family. But thanks to my father insisting that he shall let no one marry me…”

“Won’t let you marry… Huh, he must love you an awful lot. Sounds like a nice dad.”

Kojou spoke while awkwardly scratching his face. Kojou, who’d lost it when he mistakenly believed someone had confessed his love to his little sister, was in no position to judge her father.

And for a princess like La Folia, who could be packaged and sent off for a political marriage at the first false move, surely in that sense, the only thing he could call it was kindness toward her.

But La Folia tapered her lips in a pout.

“My father has declared any man insolent enough to lay a hand on *his* daughter should be prepared to have all of the knights and the army pound him into the dirt.”

“…Sorry, can I take what I said back?”

Seeing Kojou’s lips twist, La Folia giggled and smiled once more.

“You ruling a Dominion of your own without a single kinsman… Perhaps you would be able to stand up to my father…”

The silver-haired princess gently put a hand around Kojou’s shoulder as she whispered. *What are you saying?* wondered Kojou with a frown.

Looking at Kojou from a distance so short that the tips of their noses could

touch, she commanded in a clear tone. “In the name of the eldest daughter of the royal house of Aldegia, La Folia Rihavein, I command you, the Fourth Primogenitor, Kojou Akatsuki: Suck on my blood.”

As Kojou moved to say, *What kind of nonsense are you…?* he suddenly noticed the look on the princess’s face. Her blue, gemstone-like eyes had an earnest light in them, like she was praying. She wasn’t kidding around.

“This is something we need to do to save Kanase, right?” Kojou asked into the princess’s ear. “Of course it is,” she replied with a sigh.

With a delicate sound, Kojou touched La Folia with his hand and exposed her white neck. The princess gently closed her eyes. Her slender shoulders made a faint shudder.

“I’ll take on your dad. You better not regret this, La Folia…”

“Of course I won’t. Do prove that I have not lost my senses, Kojou Akatsuki.”

From the tone she made her declaration with, the princess somehow seemed amused. Kojou embraced her thin body.

Under the light that shone down through the pillar of ice, their breaths converged and became one.

5

Within the pillar of ice, Kanon Kanase saw a dream.

In the dream, she was surrounded by beautiful ice and snow.

She had laid eyes upon the scene but once, right after she was born.

It was a silent, lonely, beautiful world built for a single person.

It was the landscape of Kanon’s very heart. This was her world, which Kanon had brought into being herself. Having thrust outside loneliness, sadness, despair, and all other emotions along with “the world” itself, there was now nothing left inside Kanon. Eventually, this consciousness, too, would completely fade away.

In that moment, Kanon did not even have anything left to feel sadness about

it. The single boy who had tried to stop her until the very end—when Kanon herself tried to annihilate him, that was when she lost everything.

Six layered wings, six eyeballs, six spiritual nodes drew from the outside. Through them, divine energy from a higher plane flowed into Kanon. Surely this power would guide her to an even higher existence.

There was no longer anything to be sad of. There was no longer any need to fear loneliness.

And yet…

In this world, a world devoid of anyone else, she felt a presence enter—the presence of the boy who should have been lost. The boy who should have been disintegrated had awakened.

It was not possible. It was something that must not be. And yet…

Then why? Kanon thought.

Why did the thought of it make her so happy…?

Kanon Kanase awoke within the pillar of ice. Tears continued to flow from her eyes.

“She’s on the move…”

Faux-Angel, sealed within the ice, opened her eyes.

Looking up and beholding this, Kensei Kanase let out a satisfied-sounding murmur.

Even now, a thin layer of snow rested upon his shoulders; a white frost covered the back of his black garment. His cheeks had lost all trace of blood; he was as pale as a ghost. It was the cost of having been rooted to that spot, continuing to observe Faux-Angel for several hours after she ran amok.

He’d continued to watch over the fruit of his experiment that took the form of his own “daughter.”

“Perhaps it is projection of mental imagery during the destruction and reconstruction of the surface personality? An unanticipated phenomenon, but that’s fine. Now there is nothing to tie you to this world to hold you back…

Kanon.”

Kensei looked like he’d found salvation as he spoke his monologue.

But as if to betray his words, the very earth abruptly shuddered with a tremendous roar.

An incredible oscillation warped the very air, taking on a mirage-like form. It was a summoned beast bearing two horns and an incandescent, glittering mane: a bicorn with titanic magical energy.

“…A Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor?!”

Kensei narrowed his eyes in astonishment. Leaving behind a neigh that seemed to blow like a gale, the Beast Vassal faded away; a group of three familiar faces emerged from the rupture in the ice left behind it.

It was Kojou, Yukina, and La Folia Rihavein.

Even as they held one another’s hands, the atmosphere that floated off them seemed formal and distant somehow. They awkwardly avoided meeting one another’s eyes, maintaining an odd distance from each other.

“…Achoo!”

Looking up at the dazzling tropical sun, Kojou sneezed hard. He pulled the hood of his tattered parka over his eyes as best he could.

“…Aw, crap. Really is freezing outside. Gonna catch a cold like this.”

“Will that not be because you indulged in indecent behavior with your clothes off?”

It was Yukina who replied in a frosty tone. She’d regained consciousness only to witness the sight of Kojou sucking on La Folia’s blood, putting her in a foul mood ever since.

It was understandable that Kojou’s sucking on another person’s blood while she, his watcher, was asleep, would have feelings of anger, but…

“You’re the ones that took my clothes off!!”

…Kojou made a subdued murmur in the back of his mouth at the sense it was somehow less than rational.

“That may well be so but…goodness. Come on, turn toward me. You are not a child.”

Yukina’s cheeks were still puffed up as she spoke, taking a handkerchief and wiping Kojou’s runny nose.

La Folia giggled and smiled as she watched the interaction between them.

They’d come face-to-face with death but a few short hours before, and the angel that had pushed them to that point was right before their eyes, yet even so, there was not even a smidgen of tension between them.

Rather taken back by the sight, Kensei asked his question in a composed tone.

“You are still alive, Fourth Primogenitor? Or perhaps I should say I would expect no less of the World’s Mightiest Vampire?”

Sensing an echo of pity in his voice, Kojou saw the suspect look on his face.

“Old man, you’re…”

Kensei interrupted Kojou’s words, making a one-sided speech. “But I am grateful. By fighting you once more…if she can fully activate her spiritual nodes in combat against a mighty foe, this time Kanon will evolve to the final stage. There will be no need for Kanon to seek out new enemies. No one will hurt Kanon anymore.”

Kojou felt blood rushing to his head at his all-too-arbitrary excuses. But before Kojou could think up a suitable counterargument, La Folia stepped forward. Even while smiling pleasantly, her declaration was very stern.

“That’s a rather laudable statement from someone treating Faux-Angel like a weapon for sale, Kensei.”

“That is something Magus Craft cooked up all by itself. It is no intention of mine.”

Kensei brushed off responsibility like it didn’t involve him.

“…What a self-centered thing for you to say.”

Yukina wedged herself in, her voice filled with painful sadness that silenced even the princess. The tip of the spear resting in her hands made a tiny shake;

her dark eyes wavered.

“Weren’t you raising Kanase as your own daughter? Why, then, are you using her as a test subject? Do you understand how it feels for you to treat her like a tool…?”

Yukina’s voice echoed with raw emotion.

She spoke the words in Kanon’s place that she surely wanted to speak but could not. Of those in that place, only Yukina was qualified to speak those words herself.

After all, Yukina herself, discovered by the Lion King Agency, was a tool bearing the label of Sword Shaman.

She and Kanon were a great deal alike. Yukina was fully aware of it. That’s how Yukina was able to speak to Kensei like this—not to condemn him; rather, to save not only Kanon, but also herself as well…

Kensei made a heavy sigh, as if pushed back by the power of Yukina’s feelings.

“Young lady, it seems that you are laboring under a misconception.”

“What do you mean?”

Yukina’s expression wavered from bewilderment. Kensei looked up at Kanon in the pillar of ice as he continued.

“I have never seen that as a tool, not even once. Even now, I think of her as my very own daughter.”

“You’re telling us to look at Kanon as she is now and believe that…?”

Yukina made an unpleasant scowl of her brows as she asked. Of course it got under her skin. He’d made his “very own daughter” slaughter others and had changed her into a different existence. What father could want such a thing?

But Kensei calmly shook his head.

“Even if you will not believe it, the truth is the truth. Perhaps you would be somewhat more minded to believe me if you knew her biological mother was my own younger sister?”

“Your sister’s…child?”

Kensei's unexpected words made Yukina's eyes stare intently at him.

Kojou was just as surprised as she was. If what he was saying was true, Kensei was not only Kanon's adoptive father, but also her biological uncle.

"It's some fifteen years ago now, but my sister visited Aldegia while I was serving the royal family of that nation. And so she met the king of that time and fell in unrequited love. Though I only learned of this after meeting her daughter after her death."

"And does Kanase…your daughter, know of this?"

"Of course not. Her own biological mother never claimed her. It's not something for her to hear from my lips."

Kensei bluntly shook his head as he replied to Yukina's question. But Kojou didn't think he was lying.

La Folia was silently listening to the exchange between Yukina and Kensei. No doubt she knew of Kensei's relation to Kanon from the beginning.

"The same as your very own daughter, huh…?" Kojou murmured in irritation. Kensei's little sister was Kanon's mother. What he was saying about thinking of Kanon as his own daughter was probably true. So Kensei hadn't adopted her as his daughter just because she was of the Aldegian royal family's bloodline.

But that only made his actions even less forgivable…

"That's even worse, then. Why'd you use Kanase for your experiment?"

Kensei calmly endured Kojou's wrathful gaze. "What father does not wish for his daughter to be blessed?"

"Blessed, you say?! Kanase, right now, looking like *that*?!"

"Kanon has evolved into an existence greater than human. There is no one anywhere who can harm such a being. Before long, she will be summoned to the side of God and become a true angel… If that is not being blessed, what should I call it?" Kensei replied in a tone completely devoid of hesitation or regret.

But even so, Kojou calmly turned his words back on him.

"…Did Kanase tell you that? That she wants to be blessed by becoming

something more than human?”

“What?”

That was when Kensei’s expression, hard like an unshakable boulder, began to sway.

Kojou gazed down at him with a look of pity in his eyes. Now, he was sure. *This guy doesn’t understand* anything*…!* “Is that really the blessing she wants? Or isn’t it just what you decided on your own she wants and pushed onto her by yourself? That’s what the rest of us call treating someone like a tool!”

“…Be silent, Fourth Primogenitor…” Kensei’s voice was shaking. Pain, anguish, and confusion came over his expression of unshakable faith. “You have no right to speak such words. You who know nothing even of your own self!”

What does he mean? thought Kojou, at a loss from Kensei’s unexpected words. Then, that moment…

“…Kensei, get down!” La Folia warned in a sharp voice.

But an explosion occurred above Kensei’s head before her words could reach him.

Someone had attacked the tower of ice sealing Kanon within, causing it to explode.

Countless sharply tapered shards of ice poured down, hitting Kensei squarely and making him collapse.

“Beatrice Basler…!” Yukina shouted as she realized who’d launched the attack.

The vampiress wearing the red bodysuit was standing on a hillcrest behind Kojou and the others.

She had hurled the crimson spear that had destroyed the ice. Her Beast Vassal, in spear form, scattered about fireworks of ferocious magical energy, smashing the wall of ice shielding Kanon to bits.

Standing beside Beatrice was the bestialized Lowe Kirishima.

He was holding a metallic container the size of a coffin in both arms. The beast man tossed it down the hill with great ease.

“Sorry to interrupt your leisurely discussion about how to raise a little girl, but time is money, and we want to go home already. So hurry up and beat the Fourth Primogenitor to death already, would you?”

Beatrice blew out an unenthusiastic sigh as she recalled her spear Beast Vassal to her own hand.

Then, she operated the panel of a remote control in her other hand. It was identical to the type of remote control Kensei had. Seeing the word Advent on the screen, Beatrice tossed out a laugh.

“If you don’t, these babies I made will get left on the shelf…!”

With a roar, the lid of the metallic container blew off from the inside.

With a long shriek, small silhouettes emerged from within.

They had four unsightly mismatched wings, magical runes all over their skin… and a ghastly metallic mask over their faces.

“A Masked?!” Yukina shouted in horror as she poised her spear.

What Kirishima had carried over was without doubt one of the unfinished Faux-Angels known as the Masked.

Even incomplete, they had sufficient combat ability to push Kojou into a corner. And there were two of them.

They’d apparently lost patience with Kanon, still sleeping in spite of failing to finish off Kojou, and hauled the pair off the ship they’d been on.

“What’s going on here? Didn’t you only have seven test subjects to make Faux-Angels?”

Kojou’s face grimaced as he glared at Kensei. Kensei was clutching his bloodied head as he nodded.

“There should be. I only prepared the minimum necessary for the ceremony.”

“Sorry, but that’s not enough for a product. I took the liberty of expanding production,” Beatrice explained with an expression that resembled scorn.

The Masked spread their wings and took to the air. They looked very much like the test subjects Kanon had defeated previously. Kensei’s face grimaced as he

realized the truth.

"…Clones?"

"Exactly. They might be from inferior test subjects and a long way from Kanon Kanase's capabilities, but these are loyal to my commands and therefore *much* easier to use."

Beatrice proudly raised up her remote control and laughed.

"I see," La Folia murmured coolly, making a reproachful look up at the vampiress.

To her, Beatrice was not merely the criminal who was coming after her personally. She was the enemy who'd shot down the royal armored airship and slaughtered her faithful retainers. She wanted to avenge her subordinates.

"So you indeed wanted to abduct me so that you could make clones of the Aldegian royal family."

"Ahh, you just figured it out, princess? We've already squeezed everything we can from Kanon Kanase's modified cells. Just when we were wondering what to do about it, here you came casually blundering over, you see.

"That was a big help," said Beatrice, wildly baring her fangs as she summoned her own Beast Vassal once more. She advanced upon La Folia, dragging the intelligent crimson staff along like it was an annoyance.

"I'll chop you all up into little pieces and make plenty more of you, sow. Even without modifying them to be weapons, I can sell *your* clones for a lot of money right off the shel… Gah?!"

Beatrice's lips twisted as her amused-sounding rant was interrupted by a sharp pain.

A bolt of lightning released from Kojou's body flew at her like a whip, rapping her shoulder.

However, this was not an attack aimed at Beatrice. It was merely Kojou's unquenchable anger turned into a gush of magical energy, scattering indiscriminately all around the area.

"…Fourth Primogenitor…!"

Beatrice audibly ground her teeth.

Kojou shot the vampiress a glare along with a gush of explosive magical energy.

“Shut up, old maid… And that goes for you, too, old man!”

“…?!”

Beatrice and Kensei were both at a loss for words at Kojou’s thunder-like shout.

“Like I care about royal family or spirit medium stuff! Kanase and La Folia are both ordinary girls, dammit! Making ’em into angels, making clones of ’em, talking with all these big ideas of yours…!”

Kojou’s eyes were dyed red. It was the color of incandescent rage.

If you followed the logic, it was really all quite simple.

Beatrice wanted to turn Kanon and La Folia into weapons and sell them to militaries: the mightiest sorcerous weapons in existence able to defeat even a Primogenitor…

Kensei was trying to make Kanon into an existence greater than human. That’s why Kanon needed an *enemy* capable of forcing her to use her spiritual nodes at full capacity. That’s why they’d targeted Kojou. He was the underdog offered up to make Kanon evolve…

Yes, it was quite simple.

If Kanon couldn’t defeat Kojou, their plan ended then and there. If he just made clear that no Faux-Angel was going to defeat the World’s Mightiest Vampire, the Fourth Primogenitor, that alone would…

“Get this into your thick skulls. I’m saving Kanase and smashing your stupid plan to bits! From here on, this is *my* fight!”

Kojou gave off an ominous aura as he howled.

Responding to the Primogenitor-level magic power, the Masked shot bent, warped swords of light at Kojou.

It was a silver-colored spear that lashed out, knocking the swords of light out

of the air.

Both were weapons surrounded in an artificial divine aura. Just as the Masked were able to defend against Yukina's spear, Snowdrift Wolf was equally capable of beating their swords of light away.

Yukina smiled as she poised her spear at Kojou's side, practically snuggling up against him.

"…No, senpai. This is *our* fight."

Kojou trusted her with his back as he silently looked up into the sky.

The pillar of ice had been shattered. Kojou stood on the ground as the eyes of Kanon Kanase's unfolded three-by-six wings gazed pitilessly down upon him.

6

"*Whew*… What a pain! You're really making this take more time than it needs to, Fourth Primogenitor!"

Beatrice manipulated her remote control to dish commands out to the Masked. She was surely betting that even if an unstable Faux-Angel could not be relied upon, she could defeat Kojou with the Masked alone.

The two Masked on standby descended from the sky and launched a countless hail of swords of light at Kojou and the others. There were far too many for Yukina to block single-handed. But…

"…Outta my way."

Without even turning his head, Kojou easily fended off the flying swords with his right hand. That was all it took to annihilate all of the crooked swords of light. It was as if they'd been consumed, along with the very space they'd occupied.

"…Hey, BB, what the heck's going on?!"

The look on Kirishima's face changed completely as he watched. *That wasn't in the script*, he seemed to want to say as he looked up at the vampiress beside him.

But Beatrice said nothing in reply. Her face simply grimaced in humiliation.

“…Senpai, you take care of Kanase. I’ll handle the Masked.”

Yukina conveyed her message while standing with her back against Kojou’s.

“Got it… What about La Folia, though?”

La Folia returned Kojou’s look of concern with an elegant, charming smile. “There is no need for concern. Fight to your heart’s content, Yukina.”

Yukina knew that she wasn’t the sort of person who’d say that out of bluster and pride. “I will,” Yukina said with a firm nod, sprinting toward Beatrice and the others. With ritual magic augmenting the power of her legs, she accelerated with the speed of a bullet.

“Jagra!” Noticing Yukina’s approach, the vampiress clicked her tongue and poised her Beast Vassal spear.

That spear, an intelligent weapon, could freely alter its shape, length, and angle of attack to strike down foes from a variety of ranges. Its reaction speed was well beyond human limits; even Yukina’s martial skill put her on even footing at best. All this had already been amply proven.

That was why Beatrice had an annoyed look on her face as she thrust her spear forward with ease.

“You can try and try, but it won’t change the outcome, Sword Shaman! Your spear can’t cut it against my Beast Va…

“Hngg.” Her words of triumph changed into an anguished groan.

Slipping past the Beast Vassal and lunging right at Beatrice, Yukina delivered a ferocious elbow strike to her defenseless flank. Beatrice’s face twisted from the fierce pain of ribs shattering.

“…Young Thunder!”

From point-blank range, Yukina thrust further up, her elbow infused with ritual energy. In spite of Beatrice’s superior size, the vampiress was lifted several centimeters off the ground, coughing up blood in the process.

“Wh…what are you…?” Beatrice moaned, her mind in chaos. But Yukina’s attacks did not cease. Practically glued to her, Yukina stomped on Beatrice’s instep and thrust the base of her palm up at her chin. Then Yukina struck her

flank with another elbow.

“Gbah,” Beatrice gasped, her oxygen blown out from her lungs.

“You’re…kidding. A little girl like this, taking me in hand to…”

Yukina’s expression revealed nothing as she looked up at the still-confused Beatrice.

Yukina was a Sword Shaman: an expert trained for the sole purpose of combat against demons. Using ritual power, a Sword Shaman struck her foe, inhibited demonic regenerative abilities, and soundly robbed them of their combat strength.

Only trained soldiers on the level of Kristof Gardos could stand against Yukina in hand to hand. Demons reliant on their ability to use Beast Vassals had no hope of keeping up with Yukina’s movements.

“Certainly your Beast Vassal was strong…but that is all.”

The causal murmur of Yukina’s voice could no longer reach the vampiress’s ears.

Beatrice herself was an amateur at combat. That was why her Beast Vassal fought independently of its host’s will. In other words, she left the timing of both attack and defense to the spear’s own arbitrary judgment.

Properly speaking, the spear is an all-purpose weapon.

However, so long as Beatrice was in control, there was a momentary time lag when moving between offense and defense, for the simple reason that Beatrice herself couldn’t keep up with the spear’s reaction time. Once you knew that, slipping past it was a trivial matter.

Yukina used Snowdrift Wolf as a decoy while attacking Beatrice with her own bare hands.

What Yukina was doing was simple. But Beatrice could not block such basic attacks herself.

With a Sword Shaman able to control her spear at will on one side, and a vampiress led around by the nose by her spear on the other, the outcome of the conflict had been obvious from the start.

As the Beast Vassal spear flew at Yukina from behind, Snowdrift Wolf, which she had left behind her, struck it down. Then…

"…Distort!"

From extremely close range, she delivered a palm strike to the dumbfounded Beatrice's head. The jolt, directly delivered to her brain, knocked Beatrice out cold. Seizing the opportunity, Yukina took the remote control from her hand.

It was the remote control for the Masked. With it, she should have been able to put the Masked to sleep, rendering them powerless.

"*Tch*… That ain't good…"

Seeing their rematch end in the little girl utterly crushing Beatrice, Kirishima was ready to make a run for it. As he looked around, searching for an escape route, he noticed La Folia, left behind and defenseless, and made an aggressive flick of his tongue. Leaping right off the top of the cliff, he landed right before the princess's eyes.

La Folia deftly drew her pistol as if she'd been saving it just for Kirishima.

"You're thinking, you can get out of this if you take me hostage?"

"Well, that's how it is. I'm up against the wall here. Resist and I'm gonna make it hurt."

As the princess made a strained, sagacious smile, Kirishima lowered his posture.

La Folia shot without warning. Unsurprisingly, Kirishima calmly brushed aside the pistol bullets, fired at full auto.

"I told you, nine millimeters ain't gonna do crap!"

"Is that so? I wonder, then, if you can take this, beast man?"

Discarding the out-of-ammo pistol, La Folia drew her other pistol from behind.

This was her large-size, sparkling, gold-plated spell gun. The trigger guard had been beautifully adorned, and a bayonet about fifteen centimeters long had been fastened under the pistol's long barrel.

"A spell gun, huh? That's an interesting bluff. Heh," chuckled Kirishima in a

scornful laugh.

A spell gun was a special gun firing cartridges of precious metal with ritual power sealed within. Extremely few had ever been made; you could probably count all of the fully functional ones in the entire world on your fingers. They were better suited for a museum than a battlefield.

The firepower was huge, but the cartridges were very costly; furthermore, each round had to be handloaded. The guns were intended for wealthy royals and nobles going big-game hunting. In a certain sense, it was a highly appropriate weapon for La Folia, but it wasn't something you could call well suited to combat.

"Better aim real well, Yer Highness."

Kirishima made a taunting smile as he charged straight at La Folia.

He was well aware that the princess's spell gun wasn't loaded. After all, the spell gun was a single-shot design; all Kirishima had to do to see if it was loaded was to look straight down the barrel.

La Folia had the gun pointed straight at Kirishima. But he had no reason to fear a gun without a bullet.

As Kirishima drew near to shoulder tackle the defenseless princess, a searing blue-white ray of light screamed into his field of vision. As ferocious pain ripped through his chest and fresh blood spurted everywhere, Kirishima made a bitter smile.

"Ha…ha-ha… The hell is this…? Dammit, you totally tricked me."

Still keeping the spell gun in firing position, the princess coldly looked down at Kirishima.

A blue-white light enveloped the bayonet fastened to the gun's barrel. It was that light that had seared Kirishima's field of vision and impaled him through his chest.

"I am quite offended to hear you employ the word *tricked*. I never said a single word about shooting you."

The princess casually filed her objection. But Kirishima had already lost

consciousness and tumbled to the ground and thus had been unable to hear her rebuttal.

“Lowe…! You piece of shit, you can’t even hog-tie one sow…!”

It was Beatrice who shouted at the sight of her blood-soaked subordinate, somehow having recovered from the damage inflicted upon her. Yukina, having prioritized neutralizing the Masked, had not inflicted the finishing blow.

Perhaps she had simply judged correctly that it was unnecessary.

Yukina’s final blow had not been meant to *destroy* the body, but rather, to *throw the body’s functions off*. A vampire’s regenerative ability was meaningless if its cells hadn’t been destroyed to begin with.

In matter of fact, Beatrice, whose sense of balance had been thoroughly wrecked, was still unable to walk straight. If she continued to resist even so, no doubt Yukina could finish her off with a single blow this time.

However, La Folia met Yukina’s eyes and shook her head. It was as if to say, *There is no need, I shall dispose of Beatrice personally*. Therefore, Yukina simply stood back and watched…

“You really got us good, you little bitches. Shit…this is so lame!”

Beatrice spat out blood, indignant at La Folia’s confident demeanor.

“Fine…forget about business. I’m killing all of you!”

The crimson spear appeared in the vampiress’s hand. Perhaps it was reflecting its master’s anger, but her spear-shaped Beast Vassal had transformed into a more malevolent form than before, with talons and spines along its length.

“I take it you have made your peace?”

Even with the ghastly Beast Vassal spear before her eyes, La Folia’s pleasant, charming smile did not falter. Then, she turned the tip of her bayonet toward the wounded vampiress.

“You think you’re going to stop my Beast Vassal with that puny little knife? Don’t mock me…!” Beatrice shouted. Her Beast Vassal instantly swelled up to nearly double its previous size, forming a number of jagged protrusions in the process, and rushed toward the princess.

“Jagra! Gut her like a fish!”

Beatrice smiled triumphantly. But what her ears heard was not La Folia screaming, but rather, the sound of her singing a beautiful hymn.

“…Children of the gods dwelling within me, guardians of the host, thou who bring victory in the time of the sword, ye who carry the departed!”

A flash of light enveloped La Folia’s bayonet before she completed her chant. The blue-white light illuminated the area around her like it was the sun before taking the shape of a great blade some ten-odd meters in length.

With one flash of the sword of light borne by the princess, the spear Beast Vassal was bisected, burning away in the blink of an eye.

“…Huh?”

Beatrice stared blankly at the dissipation of her Beast Vassal. She knew what the attack La Folia had unleashed really was. But it simply should not have been possible.

“A Völundr System pseudo–Holy Blade…?! That’s crazy, you can’t use one of those unless you’re close to a mother ship with a spiritual reactor…!”

“You’ve certainly done your homework. Knowledge gained from Kensei?”

La Folia nodded with a look of honest admiration.

The Völundr System was wielded with pride by knights of the Aldegian royal family. It was a tactical support system that used an enormous flow of spiritual energy to turn a mundane weapon into a spiritual one.

It was a mighty system, even said to be the mortal enemy of demonkind, but the fact it could not be employed without a link to a mother ship, such as the armored airship *Ragnvald*, limited its use.

“But surely you are well aware that the women of the Aldegian royal family are powerful spirit mediums?”

“…You can’t mean…you’ve summoned a spirit…inside of yourself?!”

Beatrice’s bloodied tongue quavered.

La Folia narrowed her eyes as she smiled. Her blue eyes glowed with a pale

white light…

“Yes. Right now, *I am the spiritual reactor*. Beatrice Basler…”

Drawing from the spirit within her own flesh, the princess controlled the enormous spiritual energy as she raised the blade high.

“For striking down not only knights, but noncombatants as well…in the name of La Folia Rihavein, I find you guilty. Now feel your sins against my people repaid.”

Thanks to the damage she’d sustained in her fight with Yukina, there was no way Beatrice could evade the attack. The pseudo–Holy Sword cleaved into the vampiress’s body from the shoulder down.

“Dam…mit all… Why is this happening to me…?”

Beatrice’s voice spat out curses as the radiant beam set her entire body ablaze.

That her body remained intact rather than burned to a crisp was because La Folia stayed her blade at the last possible moment. She was gravely wounded and on death’s door even so. After several fierce convulsions, the vampiress finally stopped moving.

No longer paying heed to the criminal she had punished, La Folia lifted her eyes toward the sky.

There, dancing in the sky, three-by-six wings spread, was Faux-Angel…

The pseudo–Holy Sword of the Völundr System would not work against an artificial angel protected by a divine aura. There was only one person who could save Kanon Kanase now…

“I believe in you, Kojou Akatsuki.”

La Folia made a charming smile as beautiful as any flower as she lovingly stroked the mark left on her own neck.

7

Affected by Kanon Kanase’s awakening, a sea breeze mixed with powdered snow began to rage.

Pillars of light broke through the cracks in the gray clouds, stretching to the ground.

Against those rays of light, Faux-Angel hovered high in the sky, gazing downward.

“Kyriiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii—!”

The angel’s visage of idealized beauty twisted as she cried out.

There was no longer any sign of the two Masked. Though unfamiliarity with the remote control had slowed Yukina down, she’d somehow managed to shut them down and put them to sleep once more. The skies belonged to Kanon alone.

The eyeballs on the surface of the six-fold wings gazed upon Kojou with the countenance of a supreme being.

Calmly ignoring the frigid gaze that seemed capable of turning all in its view to ice, Kojou gazed at Kanon’s eyes alone. Even now, Kanon’s deep blue eyes were weeping, tears of blood pouring from them.

Kojou called out to Kanon in a soft voice. “Are you suffering, Kanase?” That voice disappeared amid the snowstorm and Faux-Angel’s cry. But Kojou was sure that his words were reaching Kanon.

“I know. You wouldn’t even criticize the irresponsible owners of all those abandoned cats, not even once…”

She didn’t know who her parents were; she’d lost the land of her birth, too. She was kinder to others than anyone because she’d tasted more loneliness and sadness than any of them.

He didn’t know if she was just born that way or if it was the result of the love with which she’d been raised by those around her. But Kojou thought that her sublime nature was indeed worthy of those who called themselves royalty.

There was no way Kanon wanted to hurt anyone.

Even if her opponent was a vampire Primogenitor cursed by the very gods…

“If the folks they call gods are arrogant, petty minded, and cruel enough they have to destroy everything that they don’t like, I ain’t gonna let you be their errand girl.”

The eyeballs on the surface of the angel's wings shot out a sword of light.

But the attack was not of Kanon's volition; it was the defensive reaction of her angelic body. An angel could no more choose not to attack demons than fire refuse to burn wood or acid refuse to dissolve metal. That fact made Kanon suffer.

An angel did not possess free will; she was a phenomenon, no different than heat or light.

Turning a person into an angel was the same as looking at life itself as a mere phenomenon and spitting on it.

No doubt some would call that salvation. Some would feel it was liberation from suffering.

But to someone who did not desire it, it was nothing more than eternal torment.

There was only one way to free Kanon from her suffering—

"I'm gonna drag you down from there, right this minute!"

Kojou wiped out the swords of light that poured down one after another as he yelled. The ominous aura gushing out from his entire body made the irises of the angel's eyeballs narrow like those of a cat.

Kojou thrust his left arm out, aiming straight at them. What gushed from the end of his arm was fresh blood.

"I, Kojou Akatsuki, inheritor of the Kaleid Blood lineage, release thee from thy bonds…!"

The fresh blood transformed into an enormous surge of demonic energy; the surge condensed, changing and materializing into a summoned beast: a vampiric Beast Vassal covered in glossy, silver scales.

"…Come, Beast Vassal Number Three—Al-Meissa Mercury!"

It was a dragon that emerged. It had a slowly undulating serpentine body, four talons, and giant, ominous wings: a serpentine dragon covered in silver scales.

And there were two of them—

The two dragons that emerged simultaneously wrapped around each other's body in a spiral, taking the form of a single giant dragon with one head on each end; in other words, the form of a two-headed dragon.

This was one of the Beast Vassals that Kojou had inherited from the previous Fourth Primogenitor, Kaleid Blood. Al-Meissa Mercury, the two-headed Beast Vassal, was really two beasts merged into one.

That was why it had not awoken from sucking Yukina's blood alone.

Making them completely obey required consuming the blood of two different spiritual mediums at the same time. No doubt La Folia had allowed Kojou to suck on her blood because she'd perceived as much.

The body of the mysteriously materialized Al-Meissa Mercury was colored silver. This was both the color of Yukina's spear and the color of La Folia's hair.

"Kyriiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii—!"

Faux-Angel launched swords of light at Kojou's Beast Vassal.

But the dragons opened their great maws, swallowing the swords of light into the unfathomable depths within. They were thus annihilated without a trace. The angel's swords of light had been…consumed.

The irises of Faux-Angel's six eyeballs opened wide in apparent shock.

With a thunderous roar, the giant two-headed quicksilver-colored dragon assailed her.

The golden light that enveloped the angel's body grew in radiance. This was the light of the divine aura flowing in from the upper planes.

Enveloped in this radiance, Faux-Angel was simultaneously in the world, but not of it. Even the incredibly destructive might possessed by a Primogenitor's Beast Vassals were unable to bring harm to an otherworldly angel…or so it should have been. But…

"It's not possible…!"

Kensei Kanase raised his voice in horror at the impossible scene unfolding before him.

Kojou's quicksilver-colored Beast Vassal was consuming the very golden light that enveloped the angel's wings—wings it should have been unable to even touch. Faux-Angel cried out as light gushed out in place of blood.

"It…*consumed* Faux-Angel's Extra-Dimensional Membrane?!"

Before Kensei's shocked eyes, Faux-Angel lost one of its wings and fell.

But the two-headed dragon's assault did not relent. From the front and back, top and bottom, left and right, its two maws assaulted, whittling the golden defensive membrane down.

As Kensei beheld this, he finally realized the true nature of Kojou's Beast Vassal.

"That Beast Vassal… It's a Dimension Eater! It can consume any space and the dimension along with it?!"

Indeed. It looked every bit as spectacular as the lightning lion, every bit as wild as the incandescent bicorn. But in pure fiendishness, the quicksilver-colored two-headed dragon was head and shoulders above them.

It was a Beast Vassal that consumed, so to speak, the very world itself, dealing unrecoverable damage. It was the mortal enemy of those beings of creation known as "gods." Surely, it was the most horrible, most accursed of all Beast Vassals.

But at this moment, this very Beast Vassal was Kojou's trump card for saving Kanon.

Now that Faux-Angel had lost its upper-dimensional grace, Kojou's attacks would reach it. She was no longer invincible.

However…

As if to scoff at Kojou's vain hopes, the divine aura flowing from Kanon's body grew even more intense.

"G…wah?!"

Kojou groaned as an incredible beam of light burned into his retinas.

Kanon's body was on fire. Divine aura flames gushed from her giant wings,

completely at odds with her all-too-small limbs, before they burned out like candles.

“That’s right. She’s only fallen into the same dimension… She has not lost her flow of higher-planar divine energy.”

Kensei murmured with a voice of self-admiration, or perhaps one of relief.

Kanon’s gnawed-off wing regenerated. That wing launched countless swords of light indiscriminately.

The Beast Vassal’s attacks continued. The two-headed dragon swallowed the outpour of divine energy and the revived angelic wing whole. The lost higher-planar divine energy membrane did not recover. Kojou’s attacks were effective upon her. But so long as Kanon herself remained unharmed, upper-planar divine energy continued to flow into her.

“Kanase, stop this!” Kojou desperately called out to the still-wailing Faux-Angel.

There was no way to defeat the infinitely regenerating angel other than to destroy the spiritual nodes inside Kanon’s body…

But that was a choice he could not make. Kojou was fighting to save Kanon. If victory could only be obtained by wounding her, that was the same as defeat.

This was all the more so because Kojou’s all-too-powerful attacks would surely kill the now-defenseless Kanon.

Kojou could not defeat her. He could not win against her.

“That’s right. Even against a Primogenitor’s Beast Vassal, Faux-Angel will not be defeated. We will prevail, we *must* prevail…!”

“Shit! Why?! Even this isn’t enough, Kensei…?!”

As Kensei made a satisfied laugh like that of a martyr, Kojou’s face grimaced in despair.

That moment, Kojou heard a sharp metallic ring and the echo of a clear serene voice.

“No, senpai. In this fight, victory is ours.”

A small girl in a school uniform appeared before Kojou gripping a silver spear.

A brilliant smile came over the girl as she kicked off the earth, leaping.

“—Himeragi?!”

Kojou stared dumbfounded at the sight of her fairylike back.

Yukina did not flinch as she plunged forward into the battlefield as the artificial angel unleashed swords of light upon the giant, wildly raging dragon. And without a sound, she soared into the air.

“—I, Maiden of the Lion, Sword Shaman of the High God, beseech thee.”

Responding to Yukina’s solemn chant, her silver spear began to emit a glow.

That dim, white light was a divine oscillation wave that could rip apart any barrier. It was a purging light that could nullify all magical energy.

“O purifying light, O divine wolf of the snowdrift, by your steel divine will, strike down the devils before me!”

Yukina’s spear traced a beautiful silver arc.

Faux-Angel, her upper-planar divine energy membrane having been consumed by Kojou’s Beast Vassal, no longer possessed the strength to repel the attack.

Yukina didn’t need to run Kanon through.

All she needed was a scratch—to slice but a single, thin layer of her skin.

From that alone, the magical runes drawn upon Kanon’s flesh dissipated.

With one blow from the magic-nullifying Snowdrift Wolf, the spiritual augmentation mystic formula Kensei Kanase had engraved upon his daughter was wiped away. This meant Faux-Angel had lost the power of the spiritual nodes that had sustained it.

“Wha…?!” Kensei beheld the scene in abject shock.

Kanon, freed from her sorcerous curse, returned to her proper human form, with the three-by-six wings falling from the nude girl’s back. The eyeball-shaped spiritual nodes, no longer under control, were running amok…

…or the moment it seemed they would:

“…Chow down, Al-Meissa Mercury!”

The two giant flying maws swallowed the eyeballs whole. The glittering radiance dissipated; the gushing divine energy petered out.

As if its hunger was finally sated, the giant two-headed dragon made a final roar before it, too, vanished.

Yukina supported the unconscious Kanon as she fell back. Seeing this, Kojou breathed a sigh of relief; he glared at Kensei, standing behind him. The fingers of his right hand squeezed together, hardening into a fist.

“…It’s over, old man.”

Kensei nodded, looking like he’d been robbed of his very soul. “Yes, so it would seem.”

Watching the completely lost look in his eyes, Kojou made an exasperated sigh, lowering his poised fist without a word. Kojou had meant to smack him, but he no longer had the urge, for behind the tint of disappointment in Kensei’s eyes, Kojou was certain he felt concern for Kanon…and love.

Even if it was an illegal experiment, even if he’d ignored her wishes in the worst possible way, he was still acting out of love for her in his own fashion. Therefore, it was not Kojou’s place to punish him. It was not Kojou’s duty to decide whether to smack him or forgive him.

“Kanon…,” the black-suited sorcerous engineer weakly murmured.

The silver-haired girl once called an angel now slept on Yukina’s lap, her back curled like that of a kitten.

A single snowflake gently fell upon her cheek, but bathed in the tropical island’s powerful sunrays, it melted without a sound.

8

It was but a short time later when the coast guard patrol ship arrived.

They could make out Natsuki Minamiya and Sayaka Kirasaka on the deck of the patrol ship. Kojou did not doubt that the unexpected speed of their rescue was thanks to their hard work in investigating their whereabouts.

“Yukina!”

Sayaka, landing via an inflatable rubber boat with a trolling motor, paid the horrific sight of the scorched island not even a single glance as she embraced Yukina, who had gone to greet her arrival. Sayaka proceeded to press her own cheek to Yukina’s and rub against it.

“Ahh, Yukina, I’m so glad you’re safe, Yukina, Yukina, Yukina! All you all right? A…are you wounded?”

“S-Sayaka?! Th-that tickles…!”

Yukina twisted her body, looking a bit confounded by the intensity of Sayaka’s excitement. But Sayaka’s sudden release from anxiety had apparently set her lust ablaze. Breathing heavily through her nostrils, she moved her face right up to Yukina’s neck and pushed a hand up under her school uniform with very suggestive movements.

“Sayaka… Wa-wait, that’s…?!”

“Hey.”

Unable to watch Yukina being violated any longer, Kojou karate chopped the out-of-control Sayaka.

“Ow!” cried out Sayaka, looking over her shoulder with tears in her eyes. Taking advantage of the opening, Yukina fled, put her disheveled clothes back in order, and hid behind Kojou’s back.

“I-I’d rather you not touch me so casually!” Sayaka protested to Kojou while pressing down on the back of her ponytail. *I’m having a déjà vu feeling here*, thought Kojou with a sense of annoyance.

“Can we leave it at that? Everyone’s watching.”

“Ah!” Sayaka, having finally calmed back down, nervously looked around the area. Realizing all eyes were upon her, she cleared her throat with an “ahem,” as if that made it better.

After that, she glanced up at Kojou with what seemed like a questioning look.

“S-so you’re still alive, too, Kojou Akatsuki. Well, that’s nice. I was worried for nothing.”

“Sorry to make you worry. Totally saved our bacon by coming to pick us up, thanks.”

“Sh-sure. You’re very welcome… Wait, it’s not as if I came here for *you*! You just happened to be here! There’s no deeper meaning to it! Really!”

Sayaka’s face was bright red as she made her retort. *High-maintenance girl as usual*, thought Kojou, brusquely waving her off.

“Yeah, yeah, right. Gotcha already.”

“Ugh… What’s with you. Geez. Die already.”

For some reason, Sayaka’s look turned resentful as she grumbled her complaints. Yukina covered her eyes, as if just *watching* Kojou and Sayaka go at it was giving her a headache.

Then, La Folia called out to Kojou. “…Kojou, would you lend me a hand?”

Beside her, lying on the ground, were the unconscious Kirishima and Beatrice. *Come to think of it, I’d forgotten all about them*, Kojou reflected.

As registered demon criminals, they would no doubt be tried and sentenced according to the laws of the Demon Sanctuary. But for now, they’d just have to bring the two along on the ship.

“They still alive?” Kojou asked with concern on his face as he picked up the two tattered souls. There was no sign they were regaining consciousness, even though they’d been down for the count for quite some time now. Kojou was concerned that this was bad, even for demons. But.

“I held back. But these are wounds inflicted by a spiritually blessed pseudo–Holy Sword; even demons cannot heal them without appropriate treatment.”

La Folia’s face was nonchalant as she spoke. This beautiful, doll-like princess was the very person who’d put both demons in this state. *Note to self: Don’t make that girl angry*, Kojou secretly vowed in his heart.

Then, Sayaka's eyes widened at the sight of the two of them walking side by side and getting along very nicely.

"Princess La Folia…?!"

Her lips quivering as she murmured, Sayaka hurried to grab Kojou's arm and drag him away. She glared at Kojou with an expression resembling a scold as she asked in a shrill voice… "Wh-who do you think you're flapping your lips to so casually? Do you know who this is?"

"Yeah… Well, kinda."

Kojou made a vague nod. *Come to think of it, Sayaka was supposed to be La Folia's tour guide to begin with.*

The circumstances of their having met had somehow inured him to it, but if he had to pick, he'd have to say Sayaka's reaction was the proper reaction to have to a princess. But Kojou somehow thought that La Folia wouldn't be pleased if he changed how he was treating her at this late stage.

"Sayaka Kirasaka, is it? It seems you have gone through quite some trouble on my behalf."

La Folia gave Sayaka a charming smile. Sayaka regained her poise in a hurry.

"I'm very sorry, Your Highness. I will severely lecture this idiot later, so please…"

"It's quite all right. Kojou is special to me… He is my, ah, my first you see."

La Folia lowered her eyes slightly with a look of sudden embarrassment. Blood rushed to Kojou's face at the princess's statement, an open invitation to misunderstandings.

"Y-your first? What do you mean by that…?"

Sayaka's face stiffened as she asked. The princess lowered her face as her cheeks reddened.

But Kojou did not miss how the corners of her lovely lips formed a faint smile. La Folia clearly found this *very* amusing. She apparently meant to have fun at Kojou's expense.

And to further add to his peril, Natsuki, appearing out of nowhere, stared hard at Kojou and La Folia.

“Hmph. I see, it would seem you had a very enjoyable evening, Akatsuki.”

“Wai… Natsuki?! Can you please *not* say totally over-the-top stuff like that…!”

His homeroom teacher’s words, clearly spoken in malice, made Kojou unintentionally shout. “Enough with the first name,” replied a puffed-up Natsuki, but to Kojou, it was no time to pay attention to a trivial thing like that.

“Enjoyable…? Wait, those marks Yukina and the princess have on their necks, you don’t mean that’s…”

Sayaka’s face went pale as she moaned. Even now, Yukina and La Folia’s necks both had little marks remaining that resembled hickeys. They were the traces left by Kojou’s vampiric actions.

“It—it’s not like that, Sayaka.”

Yukina hurried as if to soothe her former roommate.

“This wound is a mark from something like artificial resuscitation; it is absolutely not a mark of unseemly behavior. Th-that’s right, isn’t it, senpai?”

“R-right. That’s how it is, so there.”

Kojou instantly went along with Yukina’s explanation to try and somehow clear up Sayaka’s misunderstanding. Their perfectly synchronized excuse made Sayaka stare at them in silence for a while.

Then, Sayaka smoothly drew her silver long sword out of the instrument case she carried in her left hand. The sword transformed into a bow as she notched a sharply tapered arrow.

“Kojou Akatsukiiiiiiiiii…!”

“K-Kirasaka? W-wait, calm down! That bow, it’s, um, it’s dangerous, right…?!”

“I’d prefer if you didn’t move, foul beast! I take my eyes off you for one minute and you do *this*!”

“Gah! Listen to what people say, would you?!”

Kojou desperately fled from the berserk Sayaka’s attacks. Yukina was trying to

stop Sayaka somehow. La Folia smiled in apparent amusement at the interaction between the three.

Then, the princess walked over to Kanon Kanase, who'd been laid down on a rescue team stretcher. She'd noticed that Kanon had regained consciousness, her eyelids having opened a crack.

"Have you awakened from your bad dream, Kanon?"

La Folia asked the question as she leaned over the girl who resembled her very much, like a little sister.

"Dr…eam…"

Kanon murmured in bewilderment, looking up at the princess with a dazed look. Then, she nodded back; she seemed to think she was still dreaming.

"That's right. My father said he would save me… I…hurt many people…"

"It's all right, Kanon. Kojou and the others saved you."

La Folia made a gentle, charming smile at Kanon while pointing in the direction of Kojou and the rest.

"…He…did?"

"Not just him. I was with him as well, Kanon."

La Folia gently held Kanon's hand.

Kanon looked back at the princess with a mystified look. Perhaps she thought that even the actual touch of her hand was part of her dream.

"Who…are…?"

"I am your… Yes, I'm part of your family." La Folia spoke after a slight pause for reflection.

Kanon repeated the word with her own lips, as if it was a very precious thing indeed.

"Family…"

OUTRO

OUTRO

It was nearly Sunday evening by the time the coast guard ship docked back at Itogami Island.

The calm, mirrorlike evening sea reflected the golden color of the setting sun. Kensei Kanase was viewing the beautiful scene from a ship's cabin when the sudden wafting scent of coffee aroused a suspicious expression as he looked back.

It was a cramped cabin meant for detaining criminal suspects. It was a drab room containing only a table and chairs, all bolted down. There was a coffee cup placed on top of the table with a lone man sitting behind it.

He was a young man, sixteen or seventeen years of age, his short hair combed back, with headphones hanging around his neck.

"Care for a drink?"

The young man slid the coffee in front of Kensei.

Kensei could not recall him entering the room, let alone how long he'd been sitting there. None of the young man's actions had made any sound whatsoever: not opening the door, not closing it, not his footsteps.

"Who are you?"

"Motoki Yaze. Would you understand if I said I'm a classmate of Kojou Akatsuki?"

The young man made a leer as he answered Kensei's question.

"That uniform… I see, you're a Gigafloat Management Corporation spy monitoring the Fourth Primogenitor."

"If that's how you wanna take it, be my guest."

"Mmm," Kensei went as he made an indifferent nod. Either way, the young

man’s identity was of no concern to him.

That moment, the one and only thing that mattered to Kensei was how Kanon would be dealt with.

As part of the Faux-Angel ceremony, Kanon had engaged in multiple bouts of combat in the skies above Itogami City. A number of buildings had been wrecked; a large number of people had been injured. The chances she’d stand trial for those crimes were quite high.

“You don’t need to worry about your daughter.”

Yaze bluntly spoke as if he could see straight into Kensei’s soul.

“She’s a minor, and you guys controlled her with neural bindings. If she should be treated as something, it should be as a victim, not a suspect. Besides, she has no less than the Aldegian royal family backing her up.”

“…I see.”

Kensei breathed a sigh of relief. He needed to hear no more.

Yaze shrugged his shoulders and scratched his face, like he didn’t find this easy to say.

“Well, you see, the problem is the position you’re in, actually.”

“I do not mind. I have made my peace.”

“Well y’see…instigating murder via illegal human experiments, violating a whole bunch of Holy Ground Treaty clauses, using explicitly banned forbidden curses… Normally, you’d get the death penalty for sure, but…”

At that point, Yaze suddenly narrowed his eyes.

“The problem here is your motive. *What do you know?*”

“…What are you referring to?”

Kensei feigned ignorance as he replied. But Yaze was unmoved.

“Your logic was, you wanted to send your daughter to heaven because you love her… I don’t think that’s a complete fabrication, but I don’t think that’s the whole story. You had a reason—reason enough that you used even your own daughter as a test platform for getting Faux-Angel good to go as soon as you

could.”

“…”

Kensei fell silent.

Indeed. Kensei was not being used by Magus Craft. It was Kensei who was using them to fund his research. If he could complete Faux-Angel, he didn’t care if it was used for military purposes. Kensei *had* to complete Faux-Angel regardless of what the consequences of that might be.

“And you ask me this why? Surely your people already realize the truth,” Kensei finally replied in a solemn voice.

“There *must not exist* more than three Primogenitors. The appearance of the Fourth Primogenitor means an enemy shall appear against which such power shall be necessary. It means that we are out of time.”

“…So that’s why you wanted to manufacture angels as weapons, is it? To destroy *him*.”

“Either way, a weapon that cannot defeat a *mere* Fourth Primogenitor cannot stand against him. Go ahead and laugh.

“After all, this means that my research was a complete waste.”

Kensei turned his back with a self-mocking laugh. He did not raise his face again. Yaze made an exasperated sigh.

“Well, no need to go tossing things out. Not your research, not Kojou.”

Leaving the cup of hot coffee behind, Yaze stood up and reached toward the door. Just before leaving the room, he looked over his shoulder and informed Kensei, “You are now in corporation custody. Sorry, palace sorcerous engineer—we’re gonna make you work a little longer.”

✝

Since Natsuki and Sayaka had taken over wrapping things up after the incident, Kojou and Yukina were permitted to go home with surprising ease. With some three hours having passed after the coast guard ship arrived at Itogami Harbor, Kojou and Yukina appeared on deck, illuminated by the scorching rays of the setting sun, their preparations to go home complete.

It'd taken so long for them to prepare to disembark because Kojou had been delayed getting a change of clothes. He'd had to look for replacements for the clothes that had been shredded in the fight with Faux-Angel.

As a result, Kojou acquired old, cheap clothes given to him by the coast guard ship's captain. They were an extremely showy Hawaiian shirt and a lively pair of Bermuda shorts.

"…Couldn't they have given me something just a little better for clothes?"

Kojou sighed heavily as he looked over how he was dressed: as a tourist or more likely a street punk. As Kojou dragged his beach sandals, Yukina looked up at him, seeming barely able to hold back laughter.

"They suit you very nicely, senpai."

"I can't say I'm happy to hear that…but they're a gift and beggars can't be choosers."

Shaking his head in annoyance, Kojou looked over his shoulder. It wasn't that he expected someone to see them off; he was concerned about the people he didn't see.

"Kanase?"

"It seems she'll be hospitalized for a little while. She was severely weakened as an effect of the sorcerous ritual…"

Yukina spoke with a look of concern for Kanon.

If you thought about it logically, it made perfect sense. She'd been forced to evolve into an other-dimensional life-form. There was no chance Kanon's body wouldn't be affected.

The one saving grace was that Snowdrift Wolf's power had canceled out even the backlash from being forced out of her angelic form. Had that not been the case, Kanon might well have not survived.

"I wonder if she'll be all right. I mean, all the stuff besides her body." Kojou's face grimaced as he spoke.

Even though it was because she'd been used for an experiment, Kanon had still gravely wounded a number of human beings. On top of that, her father had been

arrested as a criminal. It had to be a lot of stress for the already-weakened Kanon to take.

But Yukina's expression brightened a little.

"You have a point… But apparently Ms. Minamiya will be her guardian until her father's trial is completed."

"Natsuki will? I see, nothing to worry about, then…"

Kojou sighed with relief and slackened his shoulders as he recalled the cherubic face of his homeroom teacher.

Behind the blunt attitude, Natsuki was an unexpectedly good caretaker. Kojou knew that better than most. The fact a nonsensical being like the Fourth Primogenitor could attend high school as a normal student was all her doing. Surely giving a member of a foreign royal family a place to stay was a trivial matter by her standards.

"Princess La Folia was a little disappointed, though."

Yukina's words, which seemed a little surprising somehow, made Kojou remember the princess's objective in coming to Itogami City.

"Ah, right… That princess wanted to bring Kanase back to Aldegia, didn't she?"

"Yes. But Kanon apparently declined, saying that she did not wish to live as royalty."

"…Well, if that's what she said herself… Kinda feels like a waste somehow…

"That's the kind of girl Kanon is, though," Kojou murmured with admiration, unintentionally airing his true thoughts out loud.

Yukina made a faintly pained smile as she nodded.

"The Aldegian Queen Mother seems to have been greatly dismayed as well. Apparently she'd been looking forward to meeting Kanase."

"The Queen Mother? Not the previous king?"

Kojou dubiously raised his eyebrows.

The Queen Mother would be La Folia's grandmother, but Kanon not only had no blood ties to her, but also was her husband's love child. Surely she had no

reason to go out of her way to meet Kanon.

“Apparently, Kanase’s mother had been the Queen Mother’s personal friend to begin with. Now that she knows the circumstances of Kanase’s birth, the Queen Mother apparently became quite concerned for her.”

“Huh… She’s a good person, especially since Kanase’s dad ran for the hills when his affair got exposed. Big difference between the two there.”

Kojou spoke with honest admiration.

As Kojou did so, Yukina looked up at him with a neutral expression. Then, in a frosty voice low on intonation, she murmured. “I really can’t forgive irresponsible people like that.”

“Y-yeah…”

For some reason, Kojou had a disjointed sense of impending crisis as he nodded vaguely. He subconsciously averted his eyes away from Yukina, even though he was sure he hadn’t done anything particularly wrong.

“I take my eyes off you for a few moments, and you’re making nice with other girls… Not one care about whose friend it is or how high above your station she is… And no matter how urgent the situation, to think you’d engage in such behavior right beside someone while she’s sleeping…”

“Ah, er…Himeragi? We were talking about La Folia’s granddad…right?” Kojou replied with a question in an awkward tone of voice.

Yukina made a very pleasant smile. “Yes, of course. Did you think I was referring to someone else?”

“E-er, that’s, how to put this…?”

The words of her casually posed question made Kojou feel like the walls were closing in.

The next moment, Kojou heard light footsteps from inside a corridor on the ship, and the silver-haired princess appeared. Following behind was Sayaka, looking every bit the faithful knight as she performed her escort duty. It was a sight fit for a painting.

“…Ah, so this is where you were, Kojou. And Yukina, too.”

“La Folia? Heading back already?”

Kojou wiped the nervous sweat off his cheeks as he asked, sounding like he’d just been rescued.

La Folia made an elegant, charming smile, even as she gave Kojou a suspicious look in return.

“I’m heading to a hospital. Apparently there are survivors of the crashed airship who’ve been rescued.”

“So they managed to save some of them?”

“That’s very good news,” Kojou said with a bounce in his voice.

“Yes. I’m heading to Tokyo next. I’d meant to make this an unofficial visit, but thanks to all the excitement, that simply will not do at this point.”

“Diplomacy, huh…? Not easy being royalty, either, is it?”

Not only had she been adrift at sea for days and involved in multiple combat engagements, but she’d offered Kojou her own blood, too; there was no way she wasn’t tired. The pain of the loss of numerous subordinates had to be hurting her deeply, too.

La Folia having declared she would return to her public duties even so, Kojou sent her a look of concern.

As he did, the princess gave a mystified look up at him; then, she smiled with the charm of a flower.

“…Regretfully, we must part. Thanks to you, I was able to reach this land safely. No doubt the connection between us shall someday bear yet greater import.”

Speaking with a very dignified tone, the princess walked before Kojou and Yukina. Then, she embraced Yukina, planting kisses on her left cheek, then her right. Yukina received the kisses with a somewhat startled look on her face.

Even knowing it was a simple greeting, Kojou could not be helped but be somewhat moved by the grace with which she performed it. He felt like he was watching a scene straight out of a movie.

Next, the princess took a step closer to Kojou, bringing her face to his in the exact same way. Her eyes contained a glint of mischief. Then, as the tense Kojou froze, she pressed her own lips against his.

“…!”

For everyone in that place, save the princess, time simply stopped.

Yukina’s and Sayaka’s eyes bulged wide and stayed that way. Their expressions said that neither of them could comprehend what was taking place before them.

Kojou was too floored to move very much. This suited the princess just fine; she indulged in the kiss to her heart’s content, only belatedly releasing Kojou.

“Well then, have a pleasant evening.”

La Folia waved, smiling with the face of an angel, and walked down the gangway.

“Ah… Princess, wait for… Hey, Kojou Akatsuki! You will provide me with a full explanation for this later! And by the way, turn to ash…!”

With a gasp, Sayaka regained her senses and hurried after the princess, but for just a moment, she looked over her shoulder at Kojou, shooting him a look of burning rage. “Give me a break,” Kojou said in an unwitting prayer to heaven.

“…Senpai.”

Kojou froze at the faint hint of bloodlust wafting up from Yukina’s voice.

“W-wait. I didn’t do anything wrong just now. That was probably just a little greeting…!”

“A little greeting, you say? Is that so…”

“So there’s no need to get the spear out!!”

Yukina’s hand was going to her guitar case as Kojou desperately tried to talk her down. Then…

“Kojou!”

Kojou spontaneously clutched his head as footsteps rose up the gangway in the princess’s wake.

The footsteps belonged to a small middle schooler with long hair worn in a short-cut style. It was Nagisa.

“Hey, hey, who was that?! She’s a foreigner, but she looks just like Kanon, huh? She’s really beautiful, like she’s some kind of princess. How do you know someone like that? I was so worried when you didn’t come home last night!”

“N-Nagisa?! What the heck are you doing here…?!”

Kojou was half in a daze as he beheld the sight of his sister firing off questions with the speed of a machine gun.

Kojou seriously had no idea what was going on here. Surely Nagisa had no way of knowing he was at the harbor. Furthermore, she might have witnessed him at the worst possible moment. He had absolutely no idea what kind of excuse he could use to gloss *that* over.

Having come this far, Kojou finally remembered a *very* important commitment that he’d made that he had completely forgotten about until that moment. Kojou’s face went pale as he looked at the completely innocent, smiling face of the one he’d made that important promise to.

For some reason, Asagi, in some seriously put-together street clothes, seemed to be enjoying watching the completely rocked Kojou.

“I brought her. Kirasaka told me that you were aboard this ship, you see.”

“A…Asagi… Why, when did you and Kirasaka become a thing…?!”

Kojou moaned as his back became slick from sweat.

He glanced to see what Yukina’s reaction was, but a bewildered look had come over her face. Apparently things had become even more complicated during

their absence from Itogami Island.

“I was all worried about you being kidnapped by a corporation with a private army, but looks like I shouldn’t have bothered. Looks like you’re getting along *really* nicely with a cute foreign girl, too.”

“I’m not! Er, well, I am, but we don’t have the relationship you think we do… Right, Himeragi?”

“I suppose not… Certainly, senpai, you seem to be getting along with her quite a bit better than I thought.”

“H-Himeragi…!”

His request for a lifeline bluntly slapped aside by Yukina, the sight before Kojou’s eyes grew darker.

As a look of despair came over Kojou’s face, Asagi glared at him with a smiling, frosty expression.

“Well, fine. We’ve got lots of time, so I’m going to ask you *all* about what’s going on and why while you model for me.”

“Model, you mean…?”

That promise is still good? wondered Kojou, his eyes starting to go dizzy. Certainly the deadline for the sketch was the next day.

Since she could hit the deadline if she drew the whole night, Asagi’s request wasn’t off the mark.

But under these circumstances, posing as her model meant that Asagi’s lengthy interrogation would continue until the moment she finished drawing, didn’t it?

“You won’t dare turn me down, will you? All of a sudden, I have *tons* of creative desire in me.”

An elegant smile came over Asagi as she snapped her fingers.

Kojou silently presented his hand. *This is what I get for defying a servant of God*, thought Kojou in anguish, once more cursing his own ill fortune.

As the evening sun sank into the horizon, a new night visited the Demon

Sanctuary.

And so, the daily trials and tribulations of Kojou Akatsuki, the Fourth Primogenitor, continue even today.

Afterword

Forgive the inconsistency, but if I were answering a questionnaire about what a girl who just falls out of the sky might have been riding on, I'd definitely put an "airship" pretty high up on my list, though I wonder if that'd be true for real. In this case, the girl in question really is a princess, so I thought an airship was picture-perfect in so many ways.

So, we've finally made it to *Strike the Blood*, Volume 3.

Usually the setting is a drab man-made island, but this time, I thought I'd go somewhere a little more "outdoor." There probably wasn't enough tension to make it a real survival situation, but since I personally enjoy stories where someone's washed up on a mysterious island (…though the details vary in my case), I had a lot of extra fun writing this. Having said this, I actually cut about half the deserted island scenes I'd had in mind.

I'm sure most of you already started to guess, but the reason why was that it was focusing on those two without the story advancing one tiny bit. It felt a little like cutting an episode out, but if I'd submitted the whole deal, I'd probably feel like I was banging against the publisher's door, so I figured, yeah, it's a good idea to cut it.

So, we have the arrival of yet another heroine for this volume. But this time it's Sayaka who got shoved aside. Actually, I hadn't planned on Sayaka appearing in this volume whatsoever; even after meeting with the editor, I put my foot down and said, "She's not in it." But being that obstinate doesn't do any good, so I relented in the end. Sayaka is probably a bit concerned about being wedged between Asagi, the classmate with home field advantage, and our new heroine, but as the creator, I'm overjoyed to welcome such a wonderful new character to the fold.

While on the subject of new heroines, let me borrow Kanon Kanase's personality for a moment and take the opportunity to thank all of the creators for your assistance. Thank you very much, you're lifesavers.

And finally, sincere and deepest thanks to Manyako for another round of superb, charming illustrations! And let me thank from the bottom of my heart Yukiwa the editor and everyone who worked to get this book into print!

And a very hearty thanks to all of you readers who have read this book.

I hope to see you again next volume.

Gakuto Mikumo

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